VENTRILOQUISMS: FICTIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

The English *ventriloquism* comes from the Latin *venter* (belly) and *loqui* (to speak), suggesting a disembodied or misplaced voice, a speaking that appears to come from where it cannot logically originate. Indeed, one of the earliest appearances of the English *ventriloquist* (in T. Blount's *Glossographia*, 1656) is as "one who hath an evil spirit speaking in his belly, or one that by use and practice can speak as it were out of his belly, not moving his lips" (OED). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was widely believed that sounds and voices coming from the stomach were those of evil spirits. Of course, contemporary use of the word also suggests the performer, doll on knee, who converses at length with a character whose personality and voice are often slightly more sinister versions of the performer's own.

The separation of one from others—and of one from oneself—inherent to ventriloquism performatively reproduces the human experience of selfhood; this separation can, at turns, be irritating, joyful, liberating, imprisoning, or lethal. *Ventriloquisms* examines these turns and renders realities in which the boundaries of separation are constantly renegotiated, as well as celebrated and transgressed. This collection of fictions contributes to the rich etymology dwelling within its title, exploring subjectivity by interrogating and disrupting

traditional elements of realist, narrative fiction—most notably character and plot. These fictions refuse a linear progression and causally motivated explanations for thoughts and behaviors, choosing instead innovative forms and first-person speakers who variably narrate, denarrate, and fight against their own consciousnesses. Many of the voices in *Ventriloquisms* offer grotesque images that blend multiple bodies and selves together and question the individual identity model of self, championing instead a plural, if not communal, model for narrators and characters.

These speakers and fictions pursue responses and complications to Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, and other texts that challenge the notion that the self is strictly embodied, whole, and discrete from other beings. *Ventriloquisms* seeks to show selves who are more than the sum of their physical parts, selves who transcend their circumstances through the very act of narrating—telling stories as a fundamental act of ventriloquism, and exorcising the spirits of otherness.

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CHARLIE'S KIDNEY

I. Introducing Charlie

That winter, so many animals and people froze to death the state began distributing their carcasses for meat, and I fought every dervish for Charlie. That winter of 19--, the competition nearly secured Charlie Habsburg's affections.

Charlie—possessor of palaces and countries, various exotic birds and expensive furnitures, and generations of breeding—was the most eligible bachelor that century. All we girls wanted.

His jaw.

His limbs.

His skull.

Singular to his breeding, wealth, and dominance.

We watched him with the passion of eggplants—we knew he would wed one of us, and the lucky girl would dab his famous jaw with a cloth, sopping up royal drool within the winter palace.

Our envy was compounded by the winter palace being a one-bedroom apartment in the center of the historic district in our small city. The future Mrs. Habsburg could count on this, and as the winter lasted through, so too did each of our resolves. To be—Mrs. Habsburg!

My own resolve was founded on certainty and mistrust. No stranger to my mother and married sisters, I had just achieved my seventeenth year, and I was not willing. Therefore, I stood in line Saturday morning, two hundred deep, for my chance at a curtsy directed toward Charlie Habsburg.

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II. The curtsy did not win him

Charlie kept a trained assistant, Dot, and the flourish at the end of my curtsy revealed for her my finishing school background. From the two hundred, I was selected, along with Baby Grace, as a suitor. Knowing the hardest fights were yet to come, I sought advice from one of my married sisters—the cleverest. This sister warned, Take something belonging to him as soon as you dare; never let him know you. And she returned to her cheese-making, and bade me leave her house. Into the sleet I went.

Baby Grace, my oldest unwed sister, was the first of the suitors to ask a favor of Charlie—money, of course. His building was kept locked, so she stood outside calling, Mr. Habsburg! Mr. Habsburg! She said it seven times. Dot came to the window. This was about three weeks after the curtsy line, and one hundred days before the end of the competition.

Dot called Baby Grace a creature. Several other suitors, including myself, stood across the road watching, and we heard Dot say to Baby Grace, What do you want, creature?, right to Baby Grace's face, as she stood shouting at Charlie's window. But since Charlie Habsburg was a prince in need of an heir, he gave Baby Grace the money. One hundred dollars or more, she would never say. With Charlie Habsburg's money, Baby Grace bought a tube of lipstick, and started

putting on airs. The lipstick was a coral color suited to someone very old—about Baby Grace's age.

That lipstick contained Baby Grace's finest hour, the hour everyone worried she would win Charlie, the hour he began to call her beguiling.

When my own turn came, I remembered my married sister's advice and requested Charlie's kidney. We were sitting in his living room, sipping peppermint tea, Charlie propped upon many cushions and pillows, me on the floor, holding his hand.

I had coveted the kidney—for what did such pure blood as Charlie's need with filtration? Moreover, my innards often felt gritty, as if my family lines were not true.

Charlie said he'd have to think on it, and that it was time he dressed for *A Christmas Carol.* He was taking Maxine, another suitor who had asked.

III. The wolf costume did not win him

The wolf, stolen from a department store in a fit of inspiration, came close. It was bejeweled, with a gaping mouth, real teeth, pelt cape, and tail, and though my sisters praised its strong femininity, my mother forbade it. Ghastly, she said.

But the morning the suitors' faces froze to the snowy ground with their own breath, I saved them from within the wolf. Those greedy girls, Baby Grace included, had been looking in the snow, looking for favors from Charlie, and

their greed got so that the breath coming from their bodies froze them as they groveled on the ground. Coming upon them was like coming upon a more hapless version of myself—I pulled each head up, breathing warmly from the wolf, melting their faces, and thinking how many carcasses must Charlie Habsburg own. How many carcasses and costumes would I own, once I wed him.

I wanted to win Charlie fair.

After that, Mom did not converse with me so much, but she also did not forbid the wolf costume outright, for it had proved more useful than Baby Grace's lipstick and airs.

That winter was nothing if not repetition. Describing the snow would be like explaining my trousseau. Neither possessed absolution. Yet each evening, I donned the wolf costume and chiffon, and went calling on Charlie.

No one in Charlie's family had married out for one hundred years or more, and consequently, Charlie's mother was his grandmother, aunt, and cousin. She was also his father's sister, and perhaps his own. In a word, his mother was everything.

She took a shine to me.

I never saw her stand, and of a winter evening she was fond of keeping company with Charlie and me, speaking often, and fondling her birds. She ate digestive biscuits with her tea, never partook of the state carcasses Charlie and I had grown to relish, persuaded us to play pinochle with her, and often regaled

us with memories. Charlie's mother said all we suitors must get on, for if Charlie should wed one of us, and that one should die, the next in line must keep her promises. Charlie's mother said snow falling on snow was that promise.

One blizzarding Wednesday, Baby Grace and I set out for the mall, and began to wander in the prairie. We could not tell a brick wall from a sidewalk, for all the snow, and to our surprise, it was Charlie Habsburg who rescued us. We saw his silver car approach, and then he himself, Charlie Habsburg—he wasn't even wearing boots!—climbed out the back, and tied soft rope from our waists to the bumper of his car. He gave instructions for the driver to take it slow, and he dragged us back into the city by way of the park. We didn't know Charlie had at his command such physical strength, and after that we were each a little less desirous of becoming Mrs. Charlie Habsburg.

This scrape gave us the desire not to speak to anyone, and the desire often manifested in the coming month. Yet we had pledged ourselves, and we would wed.

Toward February, a very popular suitor called Dierdre proposed a party, to cheer us and force his hand to proposal. Baby Grace did not want to go, and I did not want to go, but to admit defeat would be to call certainty and mistrust misguided.

They weren't.

IV. The kidney won him

I don't know why he gave it, but the night before the party Charlie presented his kidney, wrapped in tissue and smelling fragrantly. It was a beautiful, weak, inbred kidney, and it was mine.

Of course, I placed his kidney beside my own.

The surgery was a little difficult, but sweet Maxine helped, and we used name brand floss to stitch me closed. You may say three kidneys is too many, and I say, Two were not enough.

I wore the wolf costume and carried Charlie's kidney inside me to the party. The others were dancing a quadrille when I entered, and just like in the movies, that ended abruptly upon their perceiving me.

Certainly I bled, and unquestionably I bulged with kidney—I was a little unsteady on my feet and with my words, but I think the wolf costume, dripping, spelled everything that was to come.

Charlie, by my side in an instant, inquired after my health.

He said, Maria, you look blooming.

Yes, Charlie, I replied. Now you are a part of me.

We were wed the following December, after an extravagant engagement, vast purchases, and the defeat of several lingering dervishes. Dot officiated, and my mother and Charlie's both said they had hoped all along we would make the match. Baby Grace, who had never recovered from being tied and pulled by

Charlie, un-coraled her lips and looked harrowed that it was I and not she joining the ranks of married sisters and taking the ancient name, Habsburg.

The entire wedding was an exercise in certainty and manners, the result of so much breeding in our small city. The honeymoon found us—Mr. and Mrs. Habsburg!—cruising the Baltic.

Charlie died heirless during his thirty-ninth year, and his kidney inside me has troubled with infection since. I kept my promises, and the kidney is the only incident I do not regret, for I have placed all my trust in it, and there has never been another winter like that of my courtship, that of 19--.

A VERY DEVOUT ORNAMENTATION

Nancy works regular hours to my irregular ones, and often phones me from the desk at her office, especially on Mondays.

Yesterday she said, I'm bringing over the head.

The head is something that belonged to her recently deceased grandparent. These mounted heads, often severed from ungulates, were, Nancy promises, very popular for many centuries.

The head in question is missing an eye.

The head in question weighs eighty pounds.

Nancy and her family think that because I'm a writer, and working irregularly, I should have the head. It is my personal policy never to argue with Nancy or Nancy's family.

This morning the head was delivered by Nancy's brother Scott. Scott is wicked. I waited until after he left to prop the head in the armchair. I angled it toward my disused fireplace, unfolded a blanket beside it, and came to my bedroom.

The cat, wary of the head, has followed me, and we have closed the door. That was seven hours ago, and the phone has been ringing. Nancy, I'm sure.

We are the new owners of a head, I said to the cat. She closed one eye, slowly.

Life is often munificent, and there's nothing like a severed head in your armchair to remind you.

Around noon, my boyfriend came over. I heard him cooking noodles in the kitchen. Before long, he was eating at my yellow Formica table, another gift from another of Nancy's dead relatives. He didn't come into the bedroom, and I didn't go out, and after a while he rinsed his bowl, placed it upside down on the drainboard, and left again.

He's like that, my boyfriend. It's soothing having him around, which is not something I can say of the head: it is not soothing having the head around. So far, it has been mostly vexing.

The head belonged, in the first place, to a caribou. In the second place, I believe Nancy's grandparent shot the caribou—who can say why.

The caribou's conservation status is *least concern*. Meaning no one puzzles how to save the caribou. Experts have deemed there are enough caribou, and no one concerns for this one, dead, or for all the others, still living.

Not Nancy's grandparent, and not this caribou. Still living?

Nancy arrives. She's my third visitor in one day, very unusual. To say nothing of the head, but of course Nancy does.

It will be company for you, she says. Now open this window and let me in. Nancy is standing outside my bedroom window. It's 6 pm, and she's taken the train back from her office.

Nancy is a tactless and expressive woman. She is my friend, and because I live on the first floor, she often comes to my bedroom window.

Climbing in, she takes an electric drill with a long cord from her workbag. She plunges it into the empty socket in my bedroom and goes out to the living room. The cat has gone under the bed, and I consider the same, but in keeping with my policy, I follow Nancy to the living room, where the drill resounds.

She has mounted the head. Its fur needs combing; the one eye shines handsomely. I will become accustomed to this caribou head and tend its needs, as I have done with Nancy.

I didn't want—I was merely trying to work. What makes explaining this so difficult? I had never met Nancy's grandparent, presumably the second owner of the head, and I felt this keenly, looking at Nancy and the head she had mounted on my wall. I felt concern.

Because at some point, you stop believing you will not get old. And the older you get, the more likely your things will outlast you. At some point, your things will go to other people's homes, whether they want them or not. We choose durable things, and they last.

Nancy unplugged her drill and retracted its cord. She left me with the head, its empty socket—beckoning.

IF MOTHER, HUNTRESS

My attention came to rest again. I don't want to scare you, but many portions of form and order have been upset by The Mother. This is not a first attempt, but a recurrent return to a glass story with the story left out.

The Mother, in Connecticut, has been a Lady. She is not a New England Original, having grown up in Queens, but she lives with a precious beaker in a suburb near New Haven now.

The Master's Wife, The Mother was designed for boys. Tongue so caustic—she liked boy children and her husband, not her daughters and not women singing on the radio, not even Stevie Nicks or Whitney Houston. Women, she did not want their company.

A covered bone, The Mother wore a faded gown that was actually a sweat suit. And she didn't touch us. Her wrists and waist were insulated behind mauve elastic, and outside I tried to understand this essay.

The Master mutilated.

In 1990, The Mother had two or twelve children, all of them human or once human. She punished us, but I do not remember any crying. We were like locked glass: examined things, imposters, or insomnia. The Mother was our keeper.

Dirtiness never beat a relation, even a poor relation, and most of our relations were. But sometimes a deed—she cannot stitch—slashed across kin. Ambush lay in a cradle.

I had the fear of falling over, and one of my favorite sisters was a hare. She had one bare, bald paw, and the rest of her was covered in a luxurious fur. This sister created an aura quite apart from The Mother—huntress why?

My Hare Sister and I, we shared a bed in secrecy. We stole our Mother's ILLUSTRATIONS. They were some unfinished, prepared cloth—vulgar things that Mother made with glue-not-stitches and we stole for our ghost stories. Like a sink without a drain.

Some mother loves her child mistakenly.

Hare Sister said every animal was once an animal. It's all fixed, and if ghosts can be unknown in this world, why try to fathom a request like The Mother's.

Or fathom We without Hare Sister. She is my double, and the double of any object is that I desire it. Do not mince matter. Does mourning lie?

What surprised the sadder ghost stories was that the bedsteads were roped. The real—what is real?

Our brother, finding himself alive, went home. So much for the person. You hope to fell dogs and cut flowers, but our brother was a whisp of hair.

Chairs drift, and tables can be in two places at once. The country was rugged, full of weeds without forethought. Frequent exposure in that century left children among a monster, The Mother. We were tenants like potatoes.

But now she doesn't exist. We hung her up by her hair—long, stitched—from a small willow. We used a griddle or a girdle for effect. Does that spell "Connecticut"?

The Mother cannot step beyond invisible now. She is just one stray copy of a lost house and a year like 1990. A window or a widow—broken. But non-connection is itself distinct, and we are still close relations. What do we long for when we are happy? Something else.

Winter, always summer.

Our exertions have been most successful, and here we are. Now The Mother does not resemble a thing so much. She is not stealthy or shame-faced or angry because we hung her up. In the dining room we've ordered and displayed her wigs: an odd relic of that time, another drainless sink.

Nothing porcelain contains I am sorry.

But, Listen! Let me speak! Take refuge: Yes, there exists an uncertain hole. The fear of falling over it kept me not-me, and lonely, for a long time. I was like a kidnapped apparition. Anonymous Authorities say an assassin has been preserved, though The Mother seems quite dead. Hedged by paper, here.

At once I am arrived, with Hare Sister. Two rare animals privately owned. Pay no rent to soothe me, I am performing aslant, in the dark—paleness over.

Every year spells “Connecticut.”

All that is and all that is. Here we must separate.

LOVING SPINSTER

Spinster and Dowager shared a platter of pancakes.

With blueberry compote and maple syrup, they chatted and their stomachs ached. Spinster said, Horror is a good genre. It is the genre of my life.

Dowager said, But horror is not subtle.

Dowager does not know so much about Spinster.

Spinster and Dowager spent last night at an inn after wine tasting all afternoon. On Tuesday they both had their carpets shampooed by Quick-Chem. On Monday, Dowager started teaching Spinster to play chess, and on Sunday Spinster planted bulbs from her prize irises—Spinster calls them blood irises, but that is not the proper name—in Dowager's garden.

I am prone to auditory hallucinations, but these are mostly things I have seen.

Next week it's car rides along the coast and walks in the woods. Sharing an umbrella, painting one another's toenails, renting videos, reminiscing childhood traumas. Spinster will tell Dowager about her mother's boyfriends—even Rodney, who bought Spinster a calf and then insisted she gave birth to it herself, in spite of the receipt she found in his pocket—and Dowager can explain about the knitting needles responsible for her first sexual encounter.

A new option I have thought up is cutting off my lips.

Spinster and Dowager have not invited me, Old Maid, mutual friend who introduced them, on any of their excursions. I talked with Widow about my

feelings and she's indifferent. Widow has many characteristics; sensitivity is not one.

For example, Widow says Spinster and I must have a lot in common. But Spinster would never spy on me or anyone else because Spinster only cares about Dowager, and she has no need to spy on *her*.

My favorite Spinster memory is in a canoe. Neither of us had navigated one before, and our arms were what some people liken to noodles, wet. Spinster and I spent a lot of time crashing into trees, almost-but-not capsizing. We laughed so much I peed, but only a little and everything was wet so Spinster didn't notice.

Later in my single bed against the wall I made plans for lifting weights and buying a canoe so we could do it again with more success, but of course none of that ever happened. This is the marriage where we all got our names.

Before Dowager, Spinster cared only about her teeth and her mother. She flossed in the mirror and talked about her mother, who kept many rabbits in cages called hutches.

Spinster told me that although rabbits are very cute, they do not have personalities. Fear, she said, is not a personality.

This was something Spinster said her mother did not accept. Rabbits, to Spinster's mother, were sacred. And sacred things have personality even when they live in hutches.

You got it: Spinster has never cared about me. And now she thinks Dowager has more personality than I do. My luck with Spinster has run its course.

I could cut off my lips and put them in a long white envelope for Spinster. I could leave them in a mailbox with a note that says, With love.

The orange-handled scissors are sharp enough.

Spinster reads aloud to Dowager from a book I have never seen, and my lips would be a fitting present. But I don't really want to cut them off. A lack of lips would certainly be a disadvantage in future affairs—involving Spinster or otherwise. So I settle instead for a baby food jar filled with baby teeth. It's something I took from my mother's house when she was just beginning to be dead, and the teeth could easily be mine.

Delivering the teeth to Spinster: Are they porcelain? she asks. I'll save them in case I ever have a baby.

Dowager snorts with great personality—We are all so far past menopause.

At least in my case, this is not true. I am only twenty-five years old. And Spinster knows it but does not say anything. She and Dowager are drinking coffee with cream and eating cinnamon rolls, but no one offers me a thing. It's just as well. I might as well keep my waist where it is and give Widow a call.

I do not tell Spinster the teeth are not porcelain and I do not tell Dowager anything. I call Widow and ask if she is free, and the funny thing is she says she just got a rabbit from the pet store and would I like to come over and see it?

[white space]

*

Widow and I shared a platter of pancakes. Widow spoke of her late husband. She said she did not think of him every day, but on the last Friday of every month, when it was their custom to make pizza with pineapple. She no longer made the pizza but she still thought of it—and the late husband—on the last Friday of every month.

Of course I have never had a husband, but it surprised me to hear Widow speak of hers this way. I hope never to share such a rote and disgusting dinner with anyone, and if I have to, I will forget it as soon as I can.

I wonder how Dowager remembers her husband, and when I see Spinster in a blueberry patch, I ask her. Spinster says haven't I noticed she's not seeing Dowager anymore, or have I given up spying to spend all my time with Widow?

So I see the way the story ends is we are all alone again, but in the meantime, I might as well give Dowager a call.

I do and we spend a week together and the conversation keeps getting easier until I say, Dowager, if one of us killed the other and then herself and we both died with Spinster's name on our lips, would that be romance?

Dowager says she's actually been seeing Widow and maybe I should go back to Spinster.

I agree with Spinster that horror is a good genre, and I would like for her to say this to me. Perhaps horror and romance are the same. Perhaps if I did cut off my lips and give them to her in an envelope. The problem, as I understand it, with cutting off parts of one's own body is that it can have an unintended comic effect. And I want to create a romantic and unfunny horror for Spinster.

Potential everywhere—lips and rabbits and baked goods. And then I begin to consider vegetables and papier-mâché, long letters and one-act plays. I make many attempts, and before I can decide definitely, a man calls and asks if I'd like to marry him. I take comfort knowing we will end up alone, and I say what the hell.

My marriage wasn't at all like the canoe ride, but we stayed married for a while and never did anything particular on the last Friday of the month and we did paint each other's toenails, and finally one day Dowager called and told me, Divorcée, Spinster is gone. So I called Widow to give her the news, but of course she behaved with perfect insensitivity.

Dowager and I searched for Spinster and found her in a bar. We were overcome, and drank to excess, but we all felt fine in the morning and Widow made pancakes for us all and Spinster and I cuddled with our toes, which were not painted or concealed under a table.

Later Spinster died with her name and reputation intact, on a couch that belonged to a nephew no one knew she had. She left some possessions behind,

but not my baby teeth. We hadn't spoken in exactly two years, and by that time I had given up making things. Dowager's money did not run out, but her lovers got younger and younger until she was dating babies and lavishing them with expensive bassinets. Widow married again and ceased to be interesting, but then the husband died again. My mother, who by this time I assumed was used to being dead, said Divorcée was a stupid name, but better than Old Maid. I heard the whispery sound of scissor blades caressing one another, coming for my lips after all. This might have been a hallucination, and it is the end of the story.

WE ACT

We are a band of girls, and we run the sidewalks. Like the boys who used to run the sidewalks across town, we use guns. But unlike the boys, when we need to make an example of someone, we do so personally. We're skilled with knives and wire.

After the incident last fall, we run the sidewalks for blocks and blocks. We've gained new territory.

In spring, we hold membership drives, and recruit girls from the fourth grade. Sign up with your best friend, and we issue you two dull, rusty blades. The first to draw blood from her friend is in. We have beautiful and many scars from this ceremony.

We hear the boys were much harsher with their recruits—made them fight someone they didn't know—but we are girls, and sensitive to one another's loyalties.

Our band of girls is very successful at running the sidewalks, and at the corner stores, we eat egg sandwiches in the mornings. We love egg sandwiches—with cheese—and we guard the stores that make them. We have guns, and we have wires and knives. We've discovered threats are for children, and we don't need them anymore.

Last fall, we were distracted from the start of school by a problem with the boys, a problem the principal and parents, when they first heard of it, blamed on the boys. Girls are sweet and smart, and last fall we were particularly sweet and

smart. So smart the principal and parents didn't know what was coming until they saw it on the sidewalks.

Before last fall, we had let the boys onto our sidewalks, provided they were quiet and did not try to eat egg sandwiches. But last fall we decided a change was necessary. Some of us said if we did not get rid of the boys, soon they would get louder and try to kiss us. There were those of us who felt this could never happen, those of us who felt nature should take its course, and those of us who worried the disagreement could tear us apart.

Votes were taken, and we decided each was true, and the greatest danger was disagreement. We decided on swift execution.

We love pie, and look forward to the day when we will have it with coffee, after an egg sandwich. And the corner stores in the boys' territory had the best pie. A bonus to battling the boys.

It all came together quickly. Because once our band of girls makes up its mind, we act.

Some of us met some of them at one of their corner stores. We ordered blackberry pie and while waiting for it to warm, we told the boys—

We don't want you on our sidewalks anymore. If you come, we will make terror.

When we returned to our sidewalks, our lips and faces stained with the berries we'd soon conquer, the boys followed closely behind, ready to challenge.

We knew this, and we took the wires from our pockets and made sure we knew our knives. And we waited, knew the boys were strategizing. And we, we already had our strategy. While those sweet, stupid boys were thinking of solutions, we sent them notes they mistook for secrets.

We had kept careful track of their numbers, so in our band, we had a girl for every boy. And sensitive to one another's loyalties, we had chosen our boys. We'd been stalking for weeks.

So we each wrote the same note, one for every boy. We said—It's against the rules, but I've got to see you. I want your hips out of your jeans.

And every boy, so sweet and so stupid, agreed to a meeting he thought was secret, a meeting he thought was singular.

With wire wrapped round their throats, their arms lost strength, and their hands were no trouble, once they were severed. In the spirit of Halloween, which was fast approaching, we carved new faces for our boys, on top of the old ones. And we tied their feet together, and threw them up over telephone wires and tree branches. The feet say—We have something you want.

We have knives and wires, along with guns. We have egg sandwiches, and now we have pie, too. We have each other, and soon we will start drinking coffee.

Our mothers say now we will have no one to marry, but we have each other. We have knives and wires, along with guns, and once our band of girls makes up its mind, —!

KINDLE AND SCORCH

We stilled time together all that long winter before. We were needing many small, tender things: things kept in jars, lightly toasted, and resembling antique watches. The hill was ours. We stood one-footed atop the snow, warm and knowing in our knowing.

We were threading what was bearable, and along came nothing. In close quarters, we cooked meals and sat before fires and read old books and nothing was tender enough. So much we could not remember, we shared a name.

What we couldn't see was also ours.

Eliza's skin had turned to paper, and contained many words and sayings, though Eliza rarely spoke now.

Meanwhile, the exterminator claimed the clocks had reached beyond control. The exterminator said neighbors had been complaining of a sundial, emanating from our hill.

A family, with firmness we denied all accusations.

Yet we had begun to think a change had occurred. We consulted maps as well as Eliza; nothing gave.

Seasons can be misleading, but we were undoubtedly experiencing one. How? Eating potatoes, waiting on the alteration. A stranger came, bearing large squash and other foods—in no way tender.

I wept and wept. Sobbed uncontrollably.

Or rather, I wanted to weep, inconsolable and uncontrollable, but I sat calmly at the dining table. The stranger and the stranger's gift had no visible physical effect on me, try as I did to muster it. So I returned to reading Eliza, and Francis and Donald hunted watches in the attic, Mother and Jane claiming nothing.

In addition to regret, there were other parts of our routine! We always rose at eight, lunched at noon, hosted Sundays. Yet the clocks began to interfere.

Jane's Sunday roast, ruined because the clocks refused to keep the time it cooked. And Francis found a lazy or free sort of time drinking, buzzing behind circuit breakers in the basement. Rising at eight, we found the afternoon of the following day—we had missed so much!

Or it wasn't afternoon at all, and perhaps it was time to consider whether we were making up the time. We had all been spending before mirrors, watching our age come upon us, and our varied illnesses.

Family resemblance is never so pronounced as in sickness.

The exterminator arrived many times over with several poisons and pretty machines for dispensing them. The exterminator warned us to be careful of unused corners and countertops alike. The exterminator said our problem was considerable. The exterminator sprayed every clock she saw, and several spots where she thought time might thrive, given the chance. She recommended

keeping photos in books, books closed and lined on shelves, music softly, and no more than once a week.

But watching is practically the same as not watching. Time thrived, and clocks encroached.

It was like our trying to remember before we were born, or the hill we stood atop some long-gone winter. They say in many places it once snowed every winter, but Eliza, made of paper at the end, could neither confirm nor deny: the snippet I read affirmed every contradiction. I read its tiny tenderness every moment, again and again; at first it was nearly enough.

There were events, yes, inscrutable events. Nevertheless, with consequence. Recalling them now cannot make sense, or anyone more alive. A summer or a winter, a single day in this eastern state or that western. Eliza.

Eliza sitting on a rock, or stirring the potatoes. But lacking specificity, these are not events. Stirring potatoes, adding sauce from a jar, eating, sitting on a rock telling a story. What happened?

Jane has forgotten, Mother has forgotten, but I remember—I do remember! Swollen legs and cardboard tongue. Dear Eliza—not dead yet, but we wished. We did wish.

Every illness is potential, every age deadly. But we must recall what happened—frequent visits became an infestation. Infested by time—an event, a fact, Jane and Mother forget with deep intention. It was Eliza's antique watch.

But what happened is simple: time escaped, and potential illness realized. We resembled each other so much—control was no longer part of our routine. The event we discerned, the one we picked from all the others to remember, was Eliza's.

It was not unlikely for Eliza, in her illness, to have turned to paper: we must, the stranger said, accept the change. And the stranger alerted certain administrators, who said we must either bury or burn Eliza. Given our history of family illness, and all the control we had lost, we chose burning. And in the time since that event, we have remembered it.

The stranger was an undertaker; the event belonged to Eliza. We had chosen it for her. We had chosen it to allay illness, and we did survive. We did not burn up with Eliza, and Francis, Donald, Jane, Mother began to resemble one another less. Only I kept the family pallor, and during the burning, I attempted for the second time uncontrollable weeping. Sobs may have elevated the occasion, had I been able to perform. Without them, the burning was another fever followed by another burning. But we must recall! It was Eliza.

We had dressed Eliza in her polyester suit, and though the administrators did not allow us to watch, she burned quickly! We had taken her rings, and her fingers crisped, singed, curled to dust without them. Jane, Mother, and I each inherited one of the rings.

Dressed in her suit, Eliza was a small, tender thing.

We burned Eliza, and put her into three jars. The event occurred over several hours, and then we stood on our feet and watched from the hill all that was ours: we inherited the season—everything else was incidental, and in her home, we recovered again, lost again. Watching was the same as not watching, and Mother said we would, when time allowed, dispense the jars containing Eliza to the ocean—which, in her final illness, Eliza had longed to see.

ALL OF THEM COMELY

No surprise, the Yankee Doodle Dandy is trying to date me. He is some sort of man, or a jack-o-lantern. He looks like cotton candy.

You're not, I told him yesterday, my type.

You're wearing, he said, high-heeled shoes.

Ventriloquism is a form of self-expression, but the Yankee Doodle Dandy oozes. Reinscribed by the blades of knives laid out, or the cake, I look amazing.

This is not a prom. But, rather—something else.

You're stupid, I tell the Dandy. He drops a match to the dance floor; nothing catches.

You're not, I repeat, my type.

The Yank is not listening. He's saying something about macaroni: *You would do well to take one or two such sort of people home with you every day.*

Locating the flashlight in my beaded purse, I say, Sweetheart, let me tell you a thing or two about propriety. My living room resembles a rash more than a parlour. The sort you're describing belong to a sailboat or a pontoon.

While the Doodler lights a second match, an Aficionado—another sort of man, or a mannequin—asks me to dance. I'm reeling away with my flashlight turned on and shining up into my chin.

My dress is lace, and the Aficionado's face is delicately veined as a block of cheese. He's asking if I'm serious about the Yankee Doodle Dandy. Because, he says, I'm more your type. I can show you a rhinoceros, or a vineyard. Traveling to my country estate tomorrow—join me?

At this, I'm approximating autoasphyxiation into the bathroom. The people here could be men or women, and I keep my flashlight pressed between my jaw and esophagus—on.

You look a fright, someone says to me.

Isn't the bride gorgeous!, someone else is shrieking.

In a stall, I'm faced with the Doodle Dandy again. In lieu of a country estate, he's offering medicines, which I never use, and I'm coughing and exploding his face with my flashlight. There's nothing delicate in *this* face, though my flashlight has a pearl finish. Moving from a Yankee's nose to his low cheekbones is no act of the imagination. By the time he's dead, delicacy, like high-heeled shoes, is some sort of vector.

Stick a feather, I say, in that.

At three in the morning, ventriloquism is no longer a form of self-expression. No surprise.

SLENDER, TENDER AILMENT

But Casey let us never besmirch. Casey, the power and the glory. Casey the universe, Casey the electric light seeping, Casey tunneling sand and Casey shoveling snow. Casey, you are a box of kittens on Christmas morning; you are hips and lips and you look lovely in a violet dress.

Mother, we said, give us Casey and we commit. And Mother, you know, assented.

Casey, we are your sisters. We merely want, Casey. Casey. And when we want, we want. A brother is a straightforward technology.

We were not apart. Children, we shared two bedrooms and the hallway between. Pubescent, we planned picnics. Casey, do you remember your sadness then? Vanessa didn't want. We your sisters knew—we knew Vanessa of private schools and seaside vacations was not your equal, not your medley.

Casey, you need not wed her now. Casey, we have all suffered infection now and then. Let us remember what befell Susan, and let us prevent calamity. Now and at the hour of your.

Now we are grown, we need not bemoan what we could not help. And we need not stop what we cannot help.

And Casey, we cannot abide certain recent memories.

We were not apart. Together we filled a hole.

Somebody said, Mother, we have committed incest. But, Casey, this is not the truth. Who said this? We all merely wanted, all merely tried. There was nothing so coarse. Casey, we are your sisters. Ever and ever, amen.

But now one among us is departing, certain activities and proclivities must come to an end. We know it isn't Susan, and Casey, we know it's not you, but one of us is departing and we cannot deny certain betrayal. Nevertheless, those of us who remain plan to go on as before with you. Doctor's visits and camphor and treatments aside, we've got all the time in the world, all for you, Casey. Only certain activities and proclivities must come to an end, but perhaps you won't miss them, Casey. We have thought of nothing save your feelings in this, as in all things, and we, your sisters, have acted always, Casey, on your behalf.

Sifting, recalling, culling, we are your sisters. Casey, we have provided for your lips and your hips and your chills. We have vanquished your recurring nightmares, the one involving the kittens, and the one about cinnamon and marigolds.

Although we often mistook her, Susan was also our sister. As we forgive those who. What became Susan then, and where she is now. All we're saying, Casey, is this—before catastrophe, a culpable hand.

Casey, there are a lot of ways to lose, but we are your sisters, and we know all about who was empty and who was relevant. We know.

RUBY JONES

It was a game, and if it ended up differently, no one's to blame but Ruby Jones herself. It's true the game was my idea, but I explained all the rules to Ruby Jones, and she nodded that she understood.

We'd been accused of witchcraft and refused to plea. We would take turns.

It's true the board came from my parents' tool shed, but Ruby Jones herself helped me haul the stones in my mother's wheelbarrow. And it was Ruby Jones who suggested pulling more stones from the wall at the far end of *her* parents' property.

Now everyone remembers Ruby Jones as a pretty girl, and polite. And no one's recalling that she was quiet beyond polite and into unnerving. Everyone's forgotten the day in school, at the end of the third grade spelling bee, when she got "tourniquet," and stood politely, but refused even to say T.

And no one knows that afternoon, as we walked home, that Ruby Jones said, without my even asking, T-O-U-R-N-I-Q-U-E-T, over-pronouncing each letter, with a quiet I'm sure she measured.

That's how pretty and polite Ruby Jones was.

It's true she went first, and it's true I was excited, perhaps—as my mother often calls me—overzealous. But Ruby Jones took the part of Giles Corey first because she *wanted* to.

And Ruby Jones nodded her head, said she understood she was to call out More weight! when she'd had enough, wanted me to stop. And her eyes never

bulged the slightest, and her mouth stayed shut the entire time, as she looked up at the pinecones glowing in the afternoon. Perhaps she even heard the brief tinkling of the wind chime on her back porch. The one she'd made in second grade.

No one knows either about Ruby Jones's stone collection, the one she used to stone the rabbits. How she killed those rabbits and then meticulously collected her stones from the ground, returned them to their velvet pouch. And while I climbed down a pine, she put a little rabbit on top of her stones in her pouch, and then walked home like nothing at all was in her head.

I guess it must have hurt, but Ruby Jones knew the rules, and didn't say a word.

I don't expect to live much longer myself, but I don't believe—as some of the girls at school are saying—that anyone's going to *publicly* press me.

RODENTS

august.

waiting, waiting—for heat to quiet, school to start, rodents to return. waiting, waiting to open curtains, send Jeremiah away. waiting, waiting, waiting for rodents.

august waiting.

come september—Jeremiah away, gone, floors cool, quiet; then scampering, scamper!

a naked mole rat, a chipmunk, a mouse, a squirrel, a prairie dog, a beaver or nutria! who will be first to emerge? a scampering, a gnawing, and then baseboard flung triumphantly back: glorious rodent, come for tea!

rodents from the walls, rodents from within.

october chill, woman and rodent drinking hot spiced tea, plants dying, Jeremiah asking someone else.

can I have a popsicle? what's a pervert? do I have a mother? are you getting out of bed today? why can't I have a water pistol? it won't make me violent.

[white space]

rodents say: our teeth never stop growing—never.

I turn Jeremiah's picture down, and rodents say: we can chew his fingers off, his face.

november, and rodents rule the roost. november, and no question.

december, and Jeremiah almost memory. almost whimsical, happy memory. shredded fingers, gnawed off face.

but now, august. waiting, waiting—august.

PINCHBELLY

Blue-cloaked in square-heeled shoes, Pinchbelly shuffling down the road, come for our Lucy.

Biannually, it occurred in those days, and our Lucy's turn came like everyone 's; we had readied and she had readied. Blue-cloaked, she shuffled down the road toward Pinchbelly, and we moonfaced at our windows, willing and fearing and wanting what had come for our Lucy.

Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly. His hand salty and fragrant as a ham, Pinchbelly took our Lucy's dry and unscented hand, and they continued down the road, many of our moonfaces watching. We did not often visit one another; we did not often have visitors.

Oh, Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly.

What is it, my Lucy?

Where are we going?

To the institute.

We watchers breathed relief. Pinchbelly and our Lucy, hand in hand, continued on their destined path out of town, into woods. The infamous woods where our school hunkered, where our teachers had been preparing all their careers, and where the most prized of Pinchbelly's protégés began. Where every punishment is born unto a girl.

Our Lucy!

Most of us couldn't see her any more, and took to the telephones. Never so much anticipation since Lucy's grandmother, many years past, and we

remarked on our Lucy's mature reservation, the frank way she wore her cloak and greeted Pinchbelly, the dry and unfearing way she had pecked at her mother's face for goodbye.

Our Lucy, said a voice on the party line, could be the next Pinchbelly. But the rest of us, remembering, hushed this voice.

*

Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly.

Two pm. In the principal's office, deep in the school in the woods, our Lucy presented herself.

Whether or not these are unprecedented times, she said, I am committed to them—and to you—with absolution and devotion. We must move through these times as if through continuous rupture. Otherwise, why face the end of each day?

Our Lucy's chin strove forward, and the way she looked and the things she said were wedded, and we in our variegated homes knew our Lucy like swelling.

We had never felt so much our generations.

At the end of her voice, the punishments resumed, ringing through the airwaves directly toward us.

Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly.

In the principal's office, deep in the school in the woods, our Lucy looked upon the pupils. Recess had just begun, and one girl—square and blockish, solicitous of punishments—was called in. She would be the first.

Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly.

Every punishment began as a girl.

*

We were always expecting Pinchbelly, and yet when it came we found difficulty containing ourselves. Most of us crept inelegantly toward it, wondering, daring—would Pinchbelly take us?

Buttoned and cloaked, Pinchbelly took madly. And with hands like our Lucy's grandmother's, Pinchbelly rubbed knots from our shoulders. There were so many, and cherry nails assuaged or maximized, kneading and cooing.

Punishments, punishments.

*

You may be uncertain at times, but not now. Pinchbelly had taken our Lucy, and now the first to be punished stood before her. Inside our many homes, we felt this. The girl like a block was Carla, dressed in scarlet. Carla, younger than our Lucy by only several moons, neither winced nor flinched—she began

the reception of punishments with as much éclat as our Lucy had begun doling them. And Pinchbelly! Pinchbelly came on the radio saying it was the grandest kick-off to the festivities he could ever recall.

We in our homes stirred pots of warm food, and we felt certain.

Five pm, darker, darker. Sinews of winter outside stretching, branches snapping, girls one by one for punishment. Our Lucy sitting like a toad in water, present in punishing.

The punished began to look like Pinchbelly, and several—dressed by their mothers in honor of the ceremony—wore Pinchbelly blue. There was nothing save our Lucy to moderate Pinchbelly. Nothing save our Lucy between us and the corpses of the fully punished.

*

Eight pm, darker, darker. Resting hands on full bellies, grinning toothily at one another, we waited. We waited for darker darkness and for a pronouncement of the end of festivities. Our Lucy, our Lucy—would she return? In one hovel, her mother kept frying toast, hoping.

Thinly, we formed kisses with our lips. Those of us who had endured punishments recalled, and those of us who had not recoiled. The punishments, endured or recounted, reminded us to miss each other.

Pinchbelly, Pinchbelly.

[white space]

*

Eleven pm, dark. Quiet. Nothing on the radio, nothing on our minds save our Lucy. Our Lucy, more than a new Pinchbelly. It was a long time coming, dismantling. A testament to our Lucy, and to her Carla. In our homes, we came to understand the change, without a pronouncement, without sleep. Quiet, now. Lucy's mother, no longer frying now.

Now. Lucy, our Lucy! No one to see you but Carla dressed in scarlet. This is how we bear our history. We begin. Our Lucy and Carla dressed in scarlet, they have risen. The new is more gradual punishment, and any moment may contain it. And any of our girls as we watch out our windows may receive it.

Any girl at any moment.

Lucy, no longer ours, punishes like this.

RECOMPENSE

It wasn't true my father's men meant nothing to me; as with blouses, so with men: my father's men became me. The secret began to smell from all sides. To put it another way, my blouse was not fresh.

One day well into my adulthood, after a spell of several fatherless years, I unlocked my door to find him—my father—eating buttered crackers and spilling crumbs upon my sofa. Anger is a feeling reserved for those we esteem; it wasn't what I directed toward my father with his crumbs. I directed toward him my unfresh blouse—not a hug, but I was squeezing my father's head.

My father was a patient man, but he did not suffer stillness. Therefore, he shoved me to the ground not for the first time. Our embrace, not second nature, cost me regularity, my blouse—now ripped.

Speech was imminent. I said, Nothing reminds me of your absence. I also meant, Everything requires measure.

My father opened his mouth, exposing extraordinary patience, receding gums, and various other horrors. Namely, men.

Mucous-bound, heaving up through the spittle, armies of miniature men! My father had teeth and tongue; the men had overwhelmed them. These men were the size of fleas and they wore denim and silver polyester. Trying to remember if I'd seen my father's mouth before, if the men were new or old. Never. Never had I seen the inside of his mouth or never would I remember. Yet again, lack of precision did not prevent action.

Your men are nothing to me!, I screamed.

What happened next can only be explained. Like his daughter after him, my father knew well when to capitalize. He grinned mannishly and took a toothpick from his shirt pocket. He sucked and picked among his molars, without standing from my sofa, and he extended the writhing toothpick to me. Six tinkling men, clambering over each other to get to the tip of my father's toothpick.

I took the toothpick between fingers, and I brought it to my own mouth. I blew the men—out like candles—and they fell to my carpet! My father's men were patients he'd committed himself, and while the six fumbled through my carpet, I used a Q-tip to clean my ears.

Our noses. Our eyes and hands. The men on the floor. Our complementary anatomies remained between us. He was my father.

I had bought a blouse that morning—frills, patterned of ivy and bluebells. Wrapped in tissue and plastic, it wearied on the floor beside my front door. The men from my father's mouth approached.

How to desist? I obeyed the men. All that remained hidden was an oily rejoinder, the father, who finally said, The world is purely parodic.

PLEASE DO NOT GO BEYOND THIS POINT

You never know what might be out there. Stephen. Stephen might be out there. You can never know, but he's probably out there.

Probably cycling with Frank, out there, beyond this point. Stephen is most likely beyond this point cycling with Frank at this very moment. Could be saying something like, Judy and Jody sitting in a tree. Yes, a sycamore tree.

You know they are always cycling or inventing ditties or else lunching.

So before you get beyond this point, consider the evidence that Stephen is out there, cycling with Frank and eating a pimento cheese sandwich. Consider that, beyond this point, everyone is probably cycling with Frank, eating a pimento cheese sandwich.

Of course you never know what's out there, so we can't be sure, but we do know here, at this point, pimento cheese has been banned absolutely and without dissidence. And annoying ditties, here, are as out of fashion as children.

Consider the light out there beyond this point is almost certain to have another quality. The light out there might not be fit for a zoo or a laboratory, as the light here is. This light is most apt for a zoo or a laboratory, and out there you might not see something crawling along the gutter until it's too late. You'd almost certainly not see it in time.

It's likely a parasite. Crawling along the gutter, there.

Parasitic parasites likely abound out there, thriving beyond this point. They abound and thrive, and the one crawling along the gutter out there, though you can't be sure it's real, is bound to you. Your parasite, parallel to the gutter

there. It could be Stephen, or Frank, or pimento cheese. Pulling you to that point beyond this one.

The paradox of any parasite is its erotics. Can you recall your lament last July? And now you threaten to go beyond this point, to live past symbiosis in a state of sucking and sapping. With Stephen or Frank.

July intensifies, thick, without transition. But September came and now you desire a beyond you can't possibly understand. And what is not beyond this point, what is in fact right here inside this point, is an ordinary order—routined safety in comfort.

Please do not go beyond this point. Please. Jody, I know I have been insane and insolent, but I am not yet indomitable. Within this point, our point, your point, I have refracted in the light. We can predict with certain certainty that within this point, I will continue to refract.

Think of the generosity of this light, here!

Here is characterized by that generosity: benevolence and lack of exactitude. Here light moves toward truth: pitching into the rich dark, or else radiating whitely. Coming or going, the light here is light here. But beyond this point, all we can imagine is a steady syncopation, a sickly pall. Heavy, drenched.

In this light, Frank was buttery. Something Sally could devour and dump. But out there, beyond this point, he is almost certainly something else. Frank beyond this point is not a concept we can stand behind.

Here, the light provides. And keeps Stephen and Frank at bay, beyond this point, our point. A point we can share, a point where the light is generous and Stephen and Frank and the children do not figure.

And here, instruction and delight abound!

Left Lane Ends, for example—valiant instruction! Style and syntax!

Out there, we cannot even be sure they maintain signage.

Additionally, we can be sure that if not Stephen and Frank, there are other parasites. Why not stay here, within this point? Apply for a job—you know they're popular here—and keep your mind from pointing toward beyonds.

Unpack your bag. Tell me about you and Sally, about you and Frank; tell me about your point. Is it of no return, or are you still? When you can no longer distinguish what you can no longer distinguish—my appetence—you are still.

Beyond this point, relations may not be so efficient, so easily recursed.

Imperceptibly, in July the days grow shorter, providing more opportunity for you to visit me, sleeping. You fell but did not break skin or clavicle. And I woke but didn't break either. What we knew and where we are cannot be but the same predicament, placed precariously at the precipice of beyond.

Still, we needn't separate. Other channels can charter us within a closed circuit. For the circuit we have established here recurs within, and every revolution is a revolution.

You can never know what might be out there.

NOR DO THEY

My mouth was dusty, and my ear told a different story, because Genevieve was in it, imparting instructions for paring apples. I didn't live home anymore—had been killing moths and sleeping on a mattress on a floor.

On the bus, I was trying to locate Genevieve, or even Mildred.

The other people riding the bus ate a lot of meat, and suggested I, too, eat the meat. They offered it to me, wrapped in paper, claiming even one nibble would increase my vitality. They called me names like Lady and Miss, and they insisted I sit down, even when I said I preferred standing. They used their hands to push my shoulders toward seats.

Riding the bus is no conversation.

Nevertheless, the level of intimacy here should not be underestimated.

For instance, you can ask someone the time. This is seldom done anymore, but still possible. I could not ask a stranger, Have you seen Genevieve?, but I could ask, Do you have the time?

It's stupid because it doesn't work, asking people for the time.

When I travel with Genevieve or Mildred, people often ask, Where are you girls going? When I travel without them, people often say, I know a man who wants to take you out for steak dinner.

This keeps me most of the time on a mattress.

On the bus, a woman I at first mistook for Mildred pulled a thread from my shoulder. My sweater unraveled, exposing my greasy undershirt, my arms. The woman was not Mildred, and in fact looked more like Genevieve. This is

what I mean about intimacy. To further illustrate: another woman on the bus has a cat in a box, on her lap.

How many ways are there to be afraid in one day?

The next person traveling my route today is one of those men who introduces himself to pretty women. He's chewing salami—pulls a slice from his sandwich, kisses it with grease smeared lips, and gobbles. I say, Do you have the time, Rodney? Do you have an apple, Rodney, perhaps a knife?, and for a minute I think I see Genevieve in the bus driver's mirror.

It's a misappropriation.

The man, this Rodney, says, Do you live around here?

Paring apples is almost as stupid as asking people for the time. I'm telling you, neither works.

There is a moth in my mouth, and a mattress on the floor. Conversing requires precision of character, and I admire Genevieve and even Mildred, both of whom navigate this city with a great deal of despair. When I locate them, often they are whispering instructions for activities I do not participate in. Yet Genevieve and Mildred keep giving instructions, faithful that someone will follow them yet. They are a small coalition, and chaste, and if I had faith, I'd deposit it in them.

Yes. I live around here, with Genevieve and Mildred and a lot of other ways to be afraid of every day.

MY HUSBAND LEROY

There wasn't time to be displeased. The shotgun got off, and we were married. Before the wedding, I had been courted by the shotgun. But as I say, she got off when the jury heard about her tortured childhood—the mother who never removed the mask, the mother whose face rotted and festered behind the mask, the mother who wasn't a shotgun at all. So the shotgun I had known got off and left town, looking for a vegan breakfast and a fresh start. And I was married to the wolf.

The wolf, born in Chernobyl in 1988, is very old for a wolf but rather young for a husband, and he behaves accordingly. He wheels about the house in a wheelchair and enjoys gardening, but he is quick to temper and wishes to keep a shotgun in the house.

Honey, I told him, my last relationship with a shotgun ended with a bang.

He grunts.

Honey, I tell him, it wasn't really a bang. She left me, it was painful, now I'm married to you.

He snorts.

My husband bathes in the tub like any other husband, but of course he is a wolf, and radioactive. His childhood, like the shotgun's, was traumatic. Sometimes he smokes a cigar in the bathtub, trying to forget.

My own childhood? Not relevant to the marriage, although I should mention I'm an alcoholic. I stopped drinking for a while when I was with the shotgun, but now I'm back into it, and glad.

My husband, he isn't easy. I'm not saying I'm the victim here, but you know what I'm saying. The rooms here in our house are small, our house is small, some even call it a shotgun house. But we cheat with closets and live north of most places. And really, I'm done with the shotgun.

She's long gone, and my husband's like this: reading a newspaper, one actually printed on newsprint, legs crossed, tail resting on my arm because he's sitting beside me. I've pulled him from his wheelchair and he's on the rose colored sofa we inherited from his Aunt Harriet, who some—the same who whisper of our shotgun house—say was a dog.

Our fireplace moves a little closer and I uncross my husband's legs and he doesn't mind because the radioaction took away their feeling, and I put a shawl over his shoulders and this is what my husband is like, reading to me in a language I cannot speak or understand.

Honey, I tell him, time is like this. Time is a symptom, and so is toothpaste.

I am drunk. He snarls.

RUBY JONES

Something new at the market—they're displaying the bodies. This was Darlee's idea. She said, We must see death uncontained. In my own opinion, the death is contained in its meticulous display. Yet Darlee is on the board, and has sway.

At the market, they hang the bodies between stalls where farmers sell kale and carrots, eggs and beets. Between each stall there is one body or two, each wearing the clothes she died in.

Clarissa is there. Others known to me are also there.

We're walking through the market, beside the river, and Darlee says, The whole town is hallowed. As she says it, she pokes at one of the bodies—a small girl dressed in pink—with her cane.

I wonder when Darlee started carrying a cane. The girl's feet dangle so high that were she alive, she might enjoy hanging there, above vegetables passing their prime.

I don't think we're holy, I say.

Darlee pauses at a stall to buy eggplant, and I study Clarissa, hanging to my right. When Clarissa was alive, even as recently as last month, she used to walk through the market telling everyone how happy she was. Bliss, she said. Sheer joy. I'm the happiest person on earth.

Clarissa hangs now in loose fitting trousers and a pastel-colored flannel, and she looks, really, very happy. Clarissa was in my class all through school.

There's a sorry one, Darlee says, coming up behind me and reaching her cane toward Clarissa's un-stockinged foot.

Don't poke them, I say. It isn't respectful.

Darlee smiles viciously, but she brings her cane down.

We continue on, and I stop to buy spinach. I'm making a salad for Darlee's dinner party tonight, and as we leave the stall, I concentrate on not seeing, in my periphery, the body hanging beside the corn. I close my eyes and count the clicks of my heels against the bricks as I walk away.

Darlee grabs me.

There's what you've been looking for, she says.

Darlee, stop.

But it's too late. She's grabbed my chin and turns my head to look at the body, another known to me.

Ruby Jones.

Her eyes, of course, are closed, but her face is tight, squinched, like maybe she's about to ask me. Like she isn't dead. But her ears are shriveled as dried fruits, and her fingers bloated, unnaturally long.

I remember Ruby Jones as a teenager, swimming in the river. Katie, come in, she said. Again and again. I told her then the river was filled with sewage, and didn't swim with her. And I didn't admit I swam the river nights, even in winter, always treading as long as I could before her house.

I remember Ruby Jones, just last year or the year before, whistling inanely as she snapped her suspenders. Pausing at the gate and calling, Katie, Katie, don't you know me?

No, I said. The air is stifling. And I sat chewing on my front porch—the same front porch as all the others in our town—as Ruby Jones took off her suspenders and shirt, went swimming instead and alone. I wanted to crush her.

Ruby Jones is dead. It's a matter of time before I'm hanging in the market too, but right now I'm looking at Ruby Jones. Her froggy skin and bruise colored lips.

I say to Darlee, This town is cursed.

And even though Ruby Jones is dead, she remembers. She remembers and she twirls on the end of her rope, mincing.

Darlee looks from Ruby to me and she says, You'll still come to my party tonight? We're counting on you for the salad.

GOODBYE MESA

The mountain beside our mesa is our pitfall; all the children that become teenagers aspire to it; we begin on training wheels, to get to the end of the road; but adolescence in our town on the northernmost mesa beside the sharpest mountain is characterized by lack of acumen—we aim for the mountain, and lose. The high school has only one pupil left, and that is me; my teachers outnumber and bully me; my parents have taken possession of my speedster; why don't any of the teenagers grow older, return from mountain to mesa on well-worn bikes? My mother says maybe they will in time; my father says, You'll understand when you're older. But when I am older, and everyone is older, I will be the only person left on this mesa—unless. Me and my bike, dare we try? I've heard the stories, remember Rosa's departure last year; and Randall's before, and before Randall, Pearl and Michael, Linda and Josh and Tasha; their names appear now, printed with all the rest on the plaque in the center of our mesa; and isn't that better than pretending to memorize the periodic table, knowing generation is no longer possible in this place, waiting for millstones; and if I pedal fast enough, the edge—a launch; I can glide from this mesa, and then the landing; it's sticky; it's where the others must have failed; or else they weren't fast enough when the mesa dropped off; and knowing this I can amend. But first I need my bicycle—problem of access, problem of mobility, for my parents, in fear, have confiscated; locked in a shed, my bicycle is all lurid possibility; if I reach driving age—and my parents will give me a car—oh, never.

[white space]

Boarded windows and thrice locked door; I am fifteen years; shed, let me go! I pulled on the door with all my will, but it did not give and I was still the last teenager in our town with its terrible legacy; and I used my hammer; piece by piece, the shed came down; and I frightened Mother and Dad as they had frightened me: this will happen if you aren't careful. I felt I was capable of tearing down more, their house and especially the school; I could tear everything down and throw it to the mountain; my parents felt this too; yet I was reunited with the speedster, and the mountain—goodbye mesa. I have been practicing; so fast the pedals turn without the chain; straight; straight; don't waver; pull up; pull up; up, up, and.

WHEN OUR BODIES

The year we lived between the floorboards was the year we saw Mom's breasts for the first time. We had been.

Another year, we worried about our pee, and spent hours on the toilet. Willing it all out before bed. Pee did not come, and time and verbs will slide between sheets, up a hallway, away to school. And we'd wake in our bed, scared to move and scared of the hallway, but most scared of drowning there, from within.

Finally scarier still were our own breasts, not still at all but growing like disks of cancer. We were the only girl, and the rest of you were boys—penises unfairly always present.

Formula fed.

We were. And seeing Mom's breasts was an accident of sneaking. All before Hank, Sylvia, and Shirley Silver.

We saved frogs. We did it like this: in a tank in a bedroom we keep the frogs from water for many days, and then we ladle it onto their smalled, cracked bodies. They grow again like slow-motion popcorn, shape-changing. The ladle was a stainless steel spoon.

[white space]

We killed a turtle. Accidentally. Once we fed her tomato and then pretended to think she had her period or a miscarriage—the seeds stand in for turtles that would never be. Dead eggs. The turtle was alive then, but after we forgot to make her up, and then she is dead because we forgot to feed her too. She liked lettuce more than carrots.

Scary movies make us touch clitorises. Our own or not our own. Only penises call this lack. We go camping, and we feel like white people. We are white people camping just like white people. We spot a bald eagle and someone throws up.

The house contained nipples for all of us, but now mine were swelling. And where were you? It was the year we lived between the floorboards. Where were you?

There also was the problem of Ruby Jones, Ruby Jones quiet and polite. Her nipples were not swelling. She had not caught cancer, she did not have a penis, all she had was good.

There are a lot of kinds of frogs, and we don't know about many of them. Our parents say, *What. Frogs are frogs.* We bring a guinea pig home to die. We choose it because it's the quietest one. It's so quiet because it's dying. Later we see frogs on TV, raping other frogs. Like ducks, or men.

[white space]

Mom's breasts, I worried, could be cut off. But when I told my brother, he said, She keeps them secret. No one will cut them off. I asked if someone might take my nipples, pointing as they were now, but you said they'd take your penis first.

Ruby Jones said later, I can't believe you talk to your brother that way.

So I start talking to the nipples, who didn't seem to judge though they were intent on growing. I said, I don't want you. The nipples seemed long, and they didn't say anything, but I thought I saw them crying.

Of course I didn't. My nipples were strong.

Ruby Jones, still flat-nippled, showed me her pubic hair. I brushed it with my mom's brush, but when I told my brother he didn't laugh. He said, You're so rude. Ruby Jones didn't have pubic hair yet, so this was harder than it is.

My mom, with her big, secret breasts. My mom who does not look for us between the floorboards. My mom who would not have happy hour with Ruby Jones's mom. Ruby Jones's mom who saw me and said, By spring you'll have cleavage.

My nipples said, You'll never have cleavage. I crept from between my floorboards and took Mom's bra. It is too large, and I was scared, thinking of my cancerous nipples filling the whole thing. Cleavage could not be worth it.

We had leapt from the back of the couch, pretending to be sky-diving. But we are just kids jumping off the back of a couch in a white neighborhood. And then my nipples start to tingle or bleed, stay behind or jump ahead. I quit jumping and my nipples and my brother go on without me. I didn't know how to pronounce *brassiere*, wasn't ready.

Between the floorboards, I stopped wearing a shirt. I let my nipples hang out with everyone else, and they kept getting bigger. Soon I had breasts.

My breasts had big nipples and my nipples liked to feel—a little breeze or the tickle of the floorboards. And I liked to feel the nipples, surrounded by a fat that quivered.

My brother said, It's getting weird, hanging out with your nipples.

[white space]

Ruby Jones said, I wish I could use a straw to blow mine up.

I said, Ruby, do you want to feel mine? Maybe it will help.

[white space]

Ruby Jones kissed my nipples.

My brother kissed my nipples.

My nipples kept getting bigger. They were fat. They were my favorite part of my body.

I stopped worrying about cancer and cleavage. I loved my fat nipples. Ruby Jones loved my fat nipples. My brother loved my fat nipples. They were so fat.

We stopped living between the floorboards. By then we were vegan: people who are white, we thought, should not eat flesh. My brother went to a new school, and I began to keep my breasts secret. Ruby Jones didn't use a straw as far as I know, but her breasts grew. My brother kissed her nipples even though they weren't as fat as mine.

We save frogs. We take them from the muddy stream and put them in the water jug in the fridge. No one drank them. Dead in the cold like that, they were like tumors we can pretend to share. We listen to bluegrass music, shaking our frogs and tumors like we're dancing, and we have no idea what year it was.

I started keeping my breasts secret. I lived between the window and the wall, and laid carpet down in my room. I met Chris Forney. We rubbed our bodies on the carpet. I licked Chris Forney's nipples. He blew on mine.

My mom asked me if we were using protection. I said, I keep my breasts secret. My mom said, let me see them.

My mom licked my nipples.

Chris Forney licked my nipples.

My brother and Ruby Jones came in, and they licked my nipples. My nipples kept getting fatter. I wanted everyone to lick them.

My brother started to nibble. Ruby Jones started to nibble. Chris Forney started to nibble. Even Mom started to nibble.
[white space]
Now I have no nipples left.

Another year what I was afraid of was the soft skin under my fingernails. What if the nails should fall off and expose ten little vaginas, ready to be fucked? To say

nothing of my toes. That year I lived like smoke at the ceiling, and discovered my other brother, younger.

We were in the womb together, once. Twins. But I grew stronger and flattened you. And then, eight years later, you grew back. Inside Mom. I was fourteen and undressed in front of you, and you wore stripes. We were twins, left-handed. And you were such a baby, even your nipples were fat.

High school? Breathing was hard. But we left the oxygen tanks between the window and the wall—they were heavy and expensive. We did not have the grades to get to posterity, and were stalled. Spanish and English teachers alike say I do not understand tense, yet they do not know about living between the floorboards. I tried Latin, but that conjugation makes no more sense to my breath.

We wiped our noses with paper tissues, and mud came away. On the risers where we practiced standing and singing, there was a lot of dust, and we breathed it in. I meet Shirley and Hank Silver, who were not interested in being white. Shirley Silver ate the mud. Hank Silver put it on his body and calls himself Sylvia. We had left the oxygen tanks.

Sex had been clandestine, whispered about in basements. Accomplished only between a boy and his girl. But on the risers, we talked sex a lot. It was accomplished with great frequency, between many boys and a great number of girls and several other people, often in unsafe automobiles.

Hank Silver was not enjoying high school. Hank Silver is not my brother, who went to private school with Ruby Jones. Hank Silver is not my other brother, who lives between the floorboards now. My mom didn't look between floorboards. My mom said private school was for people who got grades. I hooked up with Hank and Shirley Silver. We are public.

We saved frogs. We found them in a barrel of oil behind the garage, and we filled a kiddy pool instead, transferred every last slicked but breathing frog. We give them fresh hose water, place them in the sun. And by morning they are all belly up dead, and shrinking.

[white space]

Shirley Silver didn't like history or health. She said the climate here suited us. But for the dust, she was right. Breathing was hard, but the oxygen tanks were heavy. We left them and we got canned meat in the cafeteria. We were no longer vegan. Chris Forney? He got work-study and slopped the meat on our styrofoam plates. We inhaled the meat and made our way to the risers to practice

graduating. We arrived in the morning and Hank Silver said, Call me Sylvia. Shirley Silver and I obliged, like we always do.

We guzzle milk after school and have sex in unsafe automobiles.

Shirley Silver eats mud like it's pie. She is full of clichés and more. By the time I made it to the risers, I longed for the days we spent lugging oxygen tanks on wheels like Hoovers. Saving frogs. To be so able. Of course posterity is not about surprises, but I have expectations, as I'm sure Ruby Jones does, as I imagine my brother does.

The guidance counselor said I was so obliging because my mom, with her big, secret breasts, had succumbed to the difficulty of breathing. That was also why Shirley and Hank Silver hooked me, the counselor said. The counselor was not a doctor. She asked me what I had to say for myself. What? Unlike a frog, I cannot breathe through my skin. Like some frogs', my skin is white. I have another brother, though I have lost my nipples.

On the risers, Shirley and Sylvia Silver left me puking candy and vodka. Breathing even harder through the vomit, but what's worse is there won't be anyone to photograph my body when I am dead. My dad and me, we waked

Mom. Then my dad disappeared, as men are wont to do, as my brothers did later. By and by, everyone looked like my dad, who looked like my brother. I never had sex with him.

For graduation, the Silver girls get a pet guinea pig; they get a lot of money too. Sylvia and Shirley Silver afford surgery to ease their breathing or shrink their penises or swell their breasts, and they gloat and gain weight, but I wheeze and look in the bottom windows of their raised ranch. They watch soft-core at night, while their parents do drinks or fellatio or arguments. We are stalled, in love, seventeen. This could be worse, like when Chris Forney kept blowing after my nipples were gone.

Always when my brothers or my mom or dad came home, I was there. Never I was in bed with someone else. I hope they will remember kindness like that. Breathing, after all, is hard.

Ruby Jones was not my sister. We watched scary movies, and we were going to be veterinarians. Fat as my nipples grew, her breasts were petite. And then she went to private school. I never even pretended Shirley Silver was my sister, and when she becomes pregnant, she screens my calls until they stop. Once I planned to breathe and wheeze with great difficulty if she should answer, but I didn't get the chance.

[white space]

No one hit me.

We had been.

Hank Silver did not like my brothers, and Sylvia Silver told me about the vaginas under my nails. Everything is something else, but brushing my hair, I feel a lump nestled to my skull. A rock—a tick—a tumor—it was white. We had saved frogs. We had been formula fed. We hated it when our bodies were not the same body. It makes breathing so much harder.

NECK & NECK

Weeding the community garden, I pulled up a neck—a little stringy, but not un-fleshy. It was no vegetable. A small bruise, a hickey perhaps, marked the left side, and a few stray hairs grew from the small Adam's apple, a woman's, I thought.

Otherwise, the neck was perfect.

I brought it home to my mate, who said it did not belong to him.

Perhaps you can cook it into the soup, I suggested.

Nothing could be more toothsome, I thought, and I looked forward to the soup my mate would make with the neck I had found. It was a resplendent neck—in the prime of life and boasting its sexy blemish.

Returning to the garden, for I owed the remainder of afternoon, I pulled only weeds. The sun shone shallowly, changed slowly. No one walked past, and the abundance of lettuces threatened my placidity. I wanted to savor the neck.

Finally, evening.

I returned through shadows to my familiar home and my familiar mate, enhanced now by the neck. Tender, chewy, perfectly seasoned. The soup was delectable.

The soup is good, I told my mate.

My mate, though an excellent housekeeper, was not given to conversation. Silently, we ate seconds and thirds, until the soup tureen was empty, and we

picked corded remains from our teeth with plastic toothpicks, and rocked in our chairs.

Until, dozing, we heard a voice from the chimney.

The voice was unmistakably that of a head resting on shoulders; the voice was also unmistakably Racheal's.

Racheal's body came down the chimney whole, and I was enthusiastic. But as she landed, Racheal's arm and then her ankle fell off, writhed on the floor for a minute, and went still.

Did you say something, Racheal?, I asked.

My mate sat knitting—a scarf, of all things.

I lost my neck in the garden, Racheal repeated.

Her fingers, those on the floor and those still attached, were cracked. Her abdomen swelled, and her skin looked purple at the seams. She was wearing her skinny jeans.

Racheal was disheveled, and I didn't know what to say.

My mate spoke up; he said, We ate it.

Racheal was disheveled, and now annoyed, and I still didn't know what to say. My mate explained with a few sentences that we hadn't known the neck belonged to her, had boiled it for hours, and enjoyed it thoroughly.

This was not something I would have explained—to Racheal, of all people. Because honesty isn't always the best policy, and how was Racheal supposed to feel knowing we'd devoured her neck without ever recognizing it?

She listened, and her hip joint came unhinged, and she tottered on one leg; the other, separated one was oddly still and present, proud. I helped Racheal onto the couch, and the leg sat down on the floor after a charged moment. Racheal whistled, from her mouth only.

She said we would have to make her a new neck, of papier-mâché.

My ever-present mate said he could probably pick the vertebrae out of the garbage. We could use them for structure, he said.

Racheal's new neck, then, was made from portions of her own spine, together with shreds of newspaper and glue. It was soft, and hardened overnight, while Racheal slept on the couch. My mate and I kept watch.

Waking, looking restored, Racheal said, Whatever happens, deny everything. Please, don't tell anyone you've seen me, or that I've got a new neck.

This cut me, sliced through me.

Racheal, I said, we are your friends unequivocally. How did your neck come to be severed? Please, tell us.

My mate loudly swallowed. Racheal began to cough, from her chest and new neck both.

Chester, she said.

Chester was my mate. So I began to understand I had taken too much for granted. I began to understand duplicity runs through even the simplest people.

That night, Racheal did not sleep on the couch. And no one kept watch, because Racheal and Chester returned to the community garden, dug until dawn

to see what they could find. Sleeping, I did not begrudge Racheal or Chester. It was true Chester had severed Racheal's neck, but it was also true that when I woke, he was concocting a new porridge. I say I began to understand, and by the time my own body was replaced with papier-mâché, I knew unequivocally.

APOLOGY FOR BROTHER

By the time I touched it, I knew it was a penis.

But at first, the penis lying alone in the salt flats looked like a very large cashew. I had never been in so much salt, and I thought perhaps the preservation qualities of the stuff enlarged the nut. It was admittedly a fleshy, ashy nut. But Brother, I live alone, and have seen stranger things.

I knew it was a penis by the time I touched it, but when I put it into my cunt, I didn't know it was yours.

Brother, I swear it.

We stopped to see the salt. For miles, salt and nothing else. It glared. It glittered. I struggled to recall the interstate. My apartment was lost. I went into the salt.

I took off my shoes.

I forgot you.

My veins swelled with thirst. I had lost my shoes, and couldn't remember if I'd been wearing jeans or a skirt. I didn't know anything about a shirt. But I still had my sports bra and panties, and the salt tasted delicious, dissolving slowly, fibrously in my mouth. If only I had a tomato, I said to a dead and perfect box elder bug nestled in the salt. And then I thought, Keep going. You'll find your tomato.

I walked on, and the salt cut the bottoms of my feet. Cracks became fissures, and I worried the salt would give way. I would fall through. To disperse my weight, I slithered.

In the salt flats, I was the only one, and I was going toward mountains. But a problem developed: my cunt felt empty. At first I thought it was dehydration.

But my cunt was not dehydrated. A thick mucus told me so.

Brother, you do not know my empty cunt. But do you remember my first mucus? I was thirteen and it came out in my underwear, and when I showed you, you said, It's nothing to be afraid of. But you would not look at my cunt. Told me not to use that word.

In the salt flats, I slithered on, and I grew tired of the glittering salt. I didn't know anything, but the salt stung the many cuts on my body. Once I had underwear, but now I was naked and my cunt was an empty chamber. My cunt throbbed and gaped, and I thought to fill it. I tried my fingers.

But fingers, covered in salt, sucked the mucus from my cunt, and then it was dry and empty, and still the sun.

I hadn't seen anyone else in my life, and—as I have said—I had forgotten you.

So when I first saw the penis, a fat curl there in the salt flats, I thought it was a gargantuan cashew—certainly not organic, but if cashews could grow as far north as Utah—the farthest west we'd ever been, Brother—they wouldn't be organic. Yes. If cashews grew in the salt flats, I'm sure they'd do it just like that penis, out in the open, no need for sheathing trees or false fruits. I'm telling you, soft though it was, it sat proudly on the stately salt.

By the time I touched it, I knew it was a penis and not a cashew.

I picked it up. And it grew a little firmer, and that's something you'll have to take responsibility for.

My cunt was empty, I held a penis in my hand, I made the obvious choice. More friction going in than was comfortable, but I was out of mucus and wasn't going to lick a strange penis I found lying on the ground.

And once it was in, my cunt was quiet. The gaping was memory.

Back at the car, beside the interstate, you unlocking your door. Looking at me. You said, I'm looking at you dubiously.

Why? I asked.

And then I saw that you were naked like a kid. And minus a penis.

You said, Where is my dick?

I forgot to pee, I said. I ran to the women's, but I could not get your penis out of my cunt. Brother, I tried.

SOME OF US HAD BEEN SUCKING

OUR FRIEND CARRIE

Some of us had been sucking our friend Carrie. Not just her face and neck, but her arms, legs, hands, waist—even her ear lobes. Bruises purpled and blued, almost glowed, and Carrie looked like a demented anemone.

Finally one of us, Melissa or Nicole, chewed out Carrie's palm, and she said we had all gone too far. We knew she was right because we had also sucked her left eyeball out of its socket the week before. She had stuffed the eye back in, but the optic nerve still hung out in a loop that outlined the grey half-circle under her eye.

We had gone too far, and as our friend, it was Carrie's right to punish us. Carrie said she would have to think about how, and we didn't hear from her for a week. Finally she called Tiffany and said she'd like to get together, and we knew she had a decision. So Tiffany told Carrie, Sure, to come on over to my place.

I bought two bottles of champagne for the event, but I was too nervous to bring them out when the girls arrived. Carrie came last and brought brownies. Her bruises and hickeys were yellowing, and now she looked haughty, like an anemone who had traveled.

None of us felt like chatting, but Carrie said we should pretend it was any other day. Sarah spoke up and said that if that were the case, we'd be sucking Carrie. Carrie said she meant any other day *before* we started sucking her, and Melissa said that even though it hadn't been that long that we'd been sucking Carrie, she couldn't remember *before*.

Carrie said this was exactly why we all needed to be punished. I reminded Carrie that none of us disagreed, that we had all gotten together to support her decision, and we were ready to hear it just as soon as she was ready to give it.

Carrie's left eye trembled like an egg yolk and the dangling nerve shook, casting shadows all the way to her chin. She said she thought she'd have a drink before telling us, and did I have any Scotch?

I told her I was dry but for the champagne, that I thought after Carrie's pronouncement and our punishment we might feel like celebrating the end of the ordeal.

Then there was a lot of blinking and air puffing out of noses, and Nicole squeezed my shoulder in sympathy, but no one said anything. A celebration was out of the question.

Carrie poured herself a glass of water from the kitchen tap, and we all took a brownie to be polite. The brownies were a little chalky—Carrie had never gotten used to high altitude baking—but none of us criticized this batch because after all, it was Carrie's big day and probably it was difficult to bake with only one palm and a compromised eye.

After we had eaten our brownies, sensitively trying to pretend it was any other day *before*, Carrie settled into my only armchair, and we lined up on the couch facing her. All week we had been speculating about how Carrie would punish us, and though Tiffany had some truly imaginative ideas, none of us

guessed Carrie's decision. I suppose that's why we had started sucking her in the first place, and why we needed her punishment.

What I remember most about that day is the disgusted way Carrie looked at me when I said what I said about the champagne, and the fact that it was the last day any of us talked about sucking Carrie.

MY LAXATIVE

A humidor—not cigars, but birds with names: lilac breasted roller and roseate spoonbill and scarlet ibis. The birds may be alive, specimens, here in my laxative's enclosure.

*

His tongue is long enough to wrap around my throat, long enough almost to go in my mouth and hang a little out my anus. Or the other way out, so my laxative's tongue could satisfice for my own.

*

He is new for me, and it is partly his face, a face like a pretty toilet, a face that conceals a miraculous tongue, that drew me. But too it is his arms, which end in two cracked and porous claws. Raked across my skin—that's the rub.

*

Nothing like romances gone by, my laxative does not explain. It's only the bird specimens who talk, and with visitors my laxative smiles and sleeps so silent. Sometimes I whisper a little, in the heat of day—no one can hear. My laxative wakes while I hold his feet in my hands and squeeze, a radiant receiving.

[white space]

*

I sent for a free sample, and I read the fine print: *the average is twenty to forty years but with love they can last well over that just like humans*. The giant average, the missing commas, the hidden sacristy, reveal, I think, my laxative's life—the difference we make together with our tongues, dry and quiet, resting on one another. The difference of relief with regularity and eating what pleases.

*

A significant anniversary: a year. I bought my laxative a dozen red roses and he ate each petal, thousands, each one discretely. After another year, the petals would be crisping and rotting, and I would be a tired woman, no need for aid in defecation. His eyelids I could swallow.

*

Finishing, ending, completing, ceasing, terminating—his arms will slacken and his porous claws soften to mush. His tongue lolling out, dabbing at my hardened anus one last time.

[white space]

*

Rain rains into my laxative's already moist enclosure, and we are not finished. We are here, a large room with two walls, a tiny fence, and a lot of netting. Moss grows, even now, this precise moment, on my laxative's back. He goes to the ground of this enclosure to produce excrement, and otherwise he lounges or languishes up high. I worry a few gangled trees are not enough for my laxative. His keepers have erected poles and ropes, but these offend his supple arms and curled claws, something of his tongue.

*

Nothing is hard. If I say my laxative's testicles are in a tiny sac soft and sweet like a past due peach, does that keep?

*

Once foods were painful, spelled ruination. Someone threatened the hospital—they'd stick hot heat into me, through the anal cavity. Now it's my laxative's tongue rolling through my ass, and his claws tickling the skin around. I eat and I

dress and undress, and everything sacred exists in this enclosure. Shit slides and plops out of me—for my laxative, my love.

*

Today is always a quiet day. I'm to join my laxative in holiness; I'll never talk again. No matter the injustices of the cacophony—the neighbors are specimens and one day they will be rolled like so many cigars. The scarlet ibis I've shat on a thousand times with the quiet in my head, and I imagine diarrhea stewed for the spoonbill and roller both. The one-legged wigeon only reminds us how captive poops can be.

*

The first search—one night when I was so bloated with constipation I could barely move. *Laxatives' mating is accomplished abdomen to abdomen, which is rare in mammals. Humans, orangutans, and bonobos are the other practitioners.* Of course I had never practiced abdomen to abdomen. The site of almost his entire life—now mine. As a newborn, my laxative endured a brief sojourn in a nursery: I must know I am not his first.

*

[white space]

My laxative and me, we scorn conversation in a world where there are so many alternatives. Amorous alternatives!

*

If I were larger, tree-sized, I'd be all for my laxative. He could put his legs in my throat, and I would shit for us both while he slept. But I'm just a little larger than he, and I grow smaller in his arms. As small as—jealous of the fleas nibbling my laxative. And where, where do they shit?

*

My constipation was a part of me, and now it isn't. The other visitors to this cage, what do they know of pleasures? We lose sight of references we don't have in common, and my laxative, he takes as many words as he can carry each time he goes to the ground. One day they'll all slide away like so many softened turds. The things I am afraid of have not exactly been displaced by my laxative; I no longer fear brushes and soaps, but I worry I will be taken away.

*

My laxative is a very sweet blinker and all his verbs are falling, nothing talking. The bottoms of his feet are dry and lined much like mine, and his eyesight is poor. Going to the ground once a month, he must feel his way. In a net between branches, I wait for him, and he feels his way back to me. Always gone by morning, scat removed by his keepers.

A BABY IS A DREADFUL THING

They're converting women like me into spindly, sexless infants, so I'm hiding out at Alex's.

There are so many things I don't want to do, but become dumb, and unsightly, and a baby is at the top of the list. Alex is sympathetic, and brings things—sandwiches and crackers and books from the library. Alex says some women like me still hang out at the library, but there haven't been any in restaurants or parks for a while. And they certainly aren't using public transportation.

The last time I went outside, a stranger spoke to me on the street. He asked if I study at the university. I didn't answer, I saw a fattish centipede on the sidewalk, I picked my nose when I was pretty sure no one was looking, I got a coffee in a paper cup, I walked through the park and stopped to admire a bird with the longest eyelashes I've ever seen and I wondered if the bird had escaped from the aviary and if so whether she would be all right, and then I let myself into Alex's apartment, planning to stay for dinner at least but not thinking I might stay until I'm the last woman like me in our city.

Alex and I are not exactly close, but sometimes we make out, and Alex agrees with my cause. Which is more than I can say for my sister. She said, We don't know what it's like to be designed and engineered infants. Maybe we would enjoy it, and maybe we'd come back from it.

I don't think she's coming back.

Some of these unsexed babies live with families in the city, but many of them are in the old foundry. It's still warm there, and they bus in formula to feed the infants. At least that's what Alex tells me.

Hiding out, I watch television and I've learned about a few creatures—including the iconic clown fish—who change sex when there's a shortage of males or females. Is it possible that this new type of baby will grow, develop sex?

But surely they thought of that before they started harvesting them.

The girls in our city are growing without interruption. They'll be women unless they die first. But not women like me, because we are converted.

My sister says Great Aunt Harriet is gone. And then my sister's calls stop, and she is gone too. If I saw the skinny babes, would I recognize any of them as my own? I ask Alex, but Alex says all the infants look the same. Now I wonder if I can trust Alex, and I say, I wonder if I can trust you.

Alex says my name, which upsets me, and then offers to bring one of the infants to the apartment.

Here?, I say. A baby?

I can bring two, Alex says, and you can compare them.

A week later, Alex goes out for ginger snaps and returns with ginger snaps and two spindled infants wrapped and concealed in the messenger bag. I think the bag contains the library books I asked Alex to pick up for me, but Alex says no, the library books can wait because there are two modified babies in the bag.

The bag is silent and still. I point this out. Alex says infants, especially these very unsexy ones, are often silent and still. This state is not to be mistaken for contentment.

Where did you get them? I ask.

Alex is evasive, says the specimens are on loan from friends, then takes the bag from me and sets it on the kitchen table, which is round and lion-footed. The bag remains silent and still. I contemplate how the more-than-natural babies might and might not resemble my sister and Great Aunt Harriet.

After a while Alex says, I'm going to take a shower. Look at them if you want.

I think it's not me, but the spindly, sexless infants Alex should consider now. Would they like to be left alone with me, a stranger? But they know each other—presumably—and outnumber me.

RUBY JONES

Toothache: from jaw to head, wrapped in gauze. Aching spreading to your nose, seeping down your chest. Aching that waters eyes, dries the skin beneath them. The tooth a rotten little sin, far back on the left. Festering, could be a fly.

Ruby Jones suffers a toothache, rare in these days of high dentistry. She never follows directions.

My interest in Ruby Jones is historic, dynamic, far-reaching. Ruby says she is not me, but that is only as true as it isn't.

It pulses, the pain in Ruby Jones's tooth. Lumps and waves, the tooth is the point at which Ruby Jones begins, between my thumb and index finger.

And yet my teeth remain—strong as Ruby Jones's are mushy.

My hands—small, sausage-colored with cold—gripped small stones as I moved slowly through the yard. And between my fingers, teeth sharp as pins.

In the supermarket where your family shopped when you were a girl—a noise frightens you, and you realize the noise is coming from your own throat. Ruby Jones's toothache is like that—crying out toothache. Flies in the rice toothache.

She tries holding water in her mouth—five minutes, ten minutes—to ease the ache. Something else. It's not as easy as you think. Grinding her teeth between my fingers, grinding and mashing.

I would touch Ruby Jones. Her hair, and her shoulders. Taking care with her swollen jaw, pained cheek. I would touch Ruby Jones, and I would speak to her, saying, Ruby, for shame, your teeth. You were a beautiful girl, but you could not follow directions. The rotting of your teeth spreading to your eyes. Ruby Jones, for shame.

She cannot smile now. Her grim pride—mouth set, line set.

Ruby Jones received, on a visit to Doctor, a tooth, larger than all the others, crowding against. Golden! He set it in line for her, and now it rots with the rest.

Ruby Jones, your teeth grow narrowly upon my hand. When you open your mouth, I have moved my hand. And when you speak, it is me saying—we have always drawn the same breath. Gnash them now, Ruby; my hand will not always be so pliant.

But for you, Ruby, a change. Extraction in kind. For I am your benefactress, Ruby. A tooth for a laugh. Here's how it works: I tie your tooth with string to the doorknob. Slam! Your tooth, that rotten little sin, that fly, festering, pops out. Gold. Higher, Ruby! Higher and farther—keep laughing. Your tooth, the place where you began, no longer pains you, and the hole oozing in your gums—nothing to worry about! Ruby, in the past you have filled in for me, and now I gladly reciprocate. Filling in your gums, filling in your jaw, your mouth, all the rest. Line by line, it's only true. The hole in your jaw is the gash in my thumb. This, I can do for you: with cold fingers, I carry Ruby Jones.

CATS

The cats did not come one by one, leaden with conjunctivitis or malnutrition, begging homes like sympathy. They did not come with tails or memories of those who had abandoned them, nor did they come with allergens or genetically small ears. Certainly they did not come from a shelter for unwanted cats.

Oh, no! Jenny paid for her cats, and they cost exactly half her inherited fortune.

From this point, my dedication to felines is absolute, said Jenny.

But Jenny, we protested, the cats will be living! Surely they will make demands!

Seventy-five times over, Jenny could not be dissuaded.

For our part, we had trouble distinguishing one cat from another. Not that they weren't given to various intellectual pursuits, but they were all of the same breed, a rare and famous breed. Like Jenny herself.

And we all agreed what is rare and famous is also immense. And so. We spent a lot of time over at Jenny's place. Saturated in immensity.

Like so many oceans and other large bodies of water, Jenny's cats engulfed all we threw into them—plastic mice and careers in advertising. Novels and conversations with mothers, exercise regimens and engagement rings. When we were in company of the cats, these were all past, given over to the cats, afternoons at Jenny's.

Jenny herself gave over nothing for all our attempts.

That's right—we tried stealing her cats. Not all seventy-five, but we believed we could get away with four. Jenny, we were aware, could tell the cats apart—but could she keep count?

We selected the four—one for the way she danced when offered strings, one for her penchant for finding secret passages through bookshelves, another for the grave expression he wore when singing, and the last for his attachment to the first.

With a can of powdered shrimp we carefully lured these four from an attic window, wrapped them in blankets, and made off. We thought to form our own aesthetics, without overdoing to excess, as Jenny had. These cats, we imagined, would bring to our apartment a glow it had hitherto lacked. Riding the bus back toward the apartment, holding blankets concealing cats atop our laps, we saw another woman with a cat—of common breeding—in a box on her lap, and we felt the glory in our mission.

Yes, Jenny could keep count, seventy-five times over.

When her cats became seventy-one, we were only too obvious. Jenny arrived in our vestibule; she was not alone.

We could not deny our deed—three of the cats were grooming on the sofa just beyond the threshold—and we said, Jenny, we do not deny it. Only we thought you wouldn't notice.

You three, said Jenny, want design.

She approached the cats, who commenced mewing and rubbing against her cashmere-encased torso and arms. She lowered her face to the dancer, who lifted each paw in turn, for Jenny to kiss and suck the supple toes. We stood back, abashed.

The fourth cat—the crooner, my favorite—padded in from the dinette, and Jenny stroked the length of his body once and placed him into a bag designed for cats. She did the same with the three from the sofa. A bag for each cat, a cat for each bag, and our own embarrassment stood between us.

The songster gave a short, joyful trill as Jenny zipped shut his bag.

And she slung the bags stylishly over her shoulders—two cats to an arm—and exited, presumably toward her apartment. But just before she reached the bottom of our stoop, Jenny lifted an offering—a policeman.

He was large and puffy, dressed in a navy uniform and wearing a hat.

Jenny seemed to have drawn the policeman from her purse, though he was much larger than the purse. He held a gun. He did not aim.

Jenny, we said, you didn't need—

The policeman advanced. He was coming up our stoop.

Jenny spoke, saying, The officer will not stay your middling impulses, but he can offer a watchful eye to prevent further unseemly disruptions. He'll help you redesign the apartment.

The policeman entered our vestibule. He did not raise the gun, but he held it. He crossed into the apartment proper, sat on the couch so recently occupied by cats, and asked for a carbonated beverage.

*

We've trained him not to place his gun beside his eggs at breakfast, and he's a wonder with novels and exercise, macramé and silk flowers, but the policeman never sings or dances with string, and his face is remarkably inexpressive—lacks glowing. He escorts every outing, and on sunny afternoons, sometimes allows us to walk by Jenny's centrally located apartment, where Jenny, that rare and famous breed, keeps all the immensity.

A LANDLORD IS AN ACT

My sister had taken up with a landlord who owned our building, most of the others on the block, and a toilet factory. My sister had taken to putting toilets in the most outlandish places, and could not be reasoned with. Peg called it a phase, but my sister said, Flushing is both ancient and contemporary, in every sense.

My sister had taken up with a landlord whose hands were machines. The landlord was arrogant and sloppy in his uniform, and his hands resembled electric can openers from the 1970s. The landlord was only thirty years old, and often groped my sister in public. His hands could not open cans.

Peg was ruffled, and swallowed a pill without water. We must, she said, take action. But the pill made Peg sleepy, and I followed suit, and soon we were evicted for non-payment of rent.

What I mean is, my sister is arrogant and sloppy, and when she was with the landlord, these qualities were enhanced. We can call her dress a uniform, because it resembled one. Lace, polka dots, zippers. They took on a metallic sheen, my sister's hands, and burned in the sun. Though she has never been employed, my sister is a resourceful woman.

The landlord raised rent and bought a small canning factory, where peaches were stuffed into tin with uncanny regularity. My sister began placing bowls of once canned peaches on top of all the toilets she had put in outlandish places.

But really what I'm trying to say is that the landlord was neither benevolent nor a movie star. He didn't have the looks, and he didn't have the stomach.

I have seen a lot of things, and those syrupy peaches in bowls on top of those toilets—!

My sister said, You ought to leave Peg behind.

Instead, Peg and I stayed on the sidewalk and peddled pills until we had enough to buy a cannery of our own—peas. My sister could not understand the psychology behind this, and she said, Peas are such a melancholy vegetable, the color of inaction. My sister, around this time, was always departing with her landlord, who preferred peaches, finally, to groping.

How the peas changed us is they made us competitive with the landlord, whom my sister began insisting we call Art.

The landlord kept his buildings locked, but we hired an actor to deliver cans of peas. To what end? Melancholia is not necessarily inactive.

My sister said, You've got to stop!

It matters little to me whether you can console your landlord. For my part, I prefer privacy to tact.

REMEMBERING JOAN ROOT

The witch's robust manners hung in her eyes, and I swallowed. That summer I steered from all manners, save the witch's. Hers I sought.

Habitually, the witch and I sat poolside, sipping drinks of fruit juice and alcohol. The drinks made manners less subtle, but I remembered the lessons of Joan Root and sat beside the witch—swallowing, trying to keep up.

Science, said the witch, is no cure-all.

To this vagary I replied with a bird-like rasp.

Maybe the witch heard and maybe she didn't. She went on, Call everything you can't control cancer—spreading. But colony collapse disorder—that's the honeybees dying, and they never were native to the Americas. Exploitation is what it's all about. There's one in the hydrangeas now. What's anyone going to do about it?

I had little idea what the witch was talking about, but she spoke with admirable conviction. In many ways, I thought, Joan Root resembled an imperiled honeybee. And I considered saying something about the mayor of our town, who had introduced a gardening or bee-related initiative, but I feared pronouncing the mayor's name.

The witch began sharpening her beak on a toenail file.

One way Joan Root resembled a bee is that she had been a long-suffering woman given to fits of humor. She's gone these twenty seasons, but I still try to say a funny thing once in a while. I rasped a little joke now—

What is a bag of wind, anyway?

The witch went on sharpening her beak, filing at a severe angle.

I often think I see one moaning at this pool, I said.

In the larval phase, said the witch, queens are the same as worker bees. But they're fed a special, royal jelly—and that's what transforms them.

I can hear Joan Root's laughter even now, I said.

Except the laughter, it turned out, came from a young woman who lived in the apartment next the witch's. The young woman was bathing in the pool, joking and jostling a friend of her own.

Let's lunch, said the witch, brushing beak file from her breast.

This conversation, others like it, is all there is. The young woman, laughing, was neither an apparition nor Joan Root, but merely a neighbor I never learned more of.

I did learn, that summer, not to over-think the manners of others. Our mayor, for example, had one or several initiatives, and she often presented them, in boardrooms, to groups of interested citizens—but what did that matter to me, who could not pronounce her name for fear?

Every fear is a lack of occurrence, said the witch or Joan Root. For all my sterility and humor, they both had grown plump on jelly.

When the end of that summer came, the witch said, You're spread thin, and you've become overly fond of watching the hydrangea, and she thrust her beak deeply into my throat—an occurrence that ended my career as a comedienne and sharpened certain memories.

THE TEA WHALE

I discovered I'd been nursing a misconception: I thought whales, like other animals, are born in spring.

But contrary to nature, most whales are born in winter. Perhaps this is why so many whales are endangered—their babies are born into harsh winters.

A beluga, shy as a ghost, in Russian or Siberian waters. This mother, small for her age and young to be so pregnant, is about to birth. The baby, more grey than the mother, and just smaller than my great aunt Harriet would have been as an adult, comes out with a face as sad as the moon on her back. But her eyes are clean in a way no land creature's can be. The baby doesn't scream. Her mother is there. But there are things she doesn't know.

The two swim on, farther from the deadly shore the baby will not live to see again.

There is a whale called the right whale. Because it was the right whale for whalers to capture and kill, when whalers savaged the sea. Harriet's drowning, sixty years before my birth, is my first memory.

From my grandmother, I inherited a glass whale. It came from tea, a company that put little glass animals in the tins.

Tins, or boxes? Early Grey.

Killer whales kill. When I was younger, I thought they were called killer for their smashing looks.

I'm not sure if they kill each other, but a pack of killer whales, worse than wolves or dingoes, closes in on a family. The seals will soon be victims, and they know it, but. They swim hard, and a baby is the first to go.

My grandmother, I can't always remember. But I'm sure I remember when she was six, watching her sister drown. My grandmother, she held a sprig of knotweed in her hand, and called out—Mother!

The blue whale is the largest creature that has ever existed, and yet it feeds exclusively on krill, tiny krill. They taste like shredded coconut, the kind my mother says her mother baked with. My grandmother?

The sperm whale has teeth, and is named for a milky substance in her head. People thought it was sperm when they first saw it. The sperm whale is the largest toothed animal in the world. I learn this sitting under my window, the ghostly puffs of dead flowers—their seeds—floating by outside. I don't wish, but the puffs are full, like my memory of my grandmother's body.

I was three and small; she was old and massive. The sunlight on her white dress, her nipple a shadow behind the fabric.

Are you still looking for Harriet?, I asked. The only time I've been slapped. She said, Don't ask questions you don't understand.

Humpback and fin whales are also baleen; without teeth they eat their tiny krill. Nothing larger than knotweed can pass through their mouths. How do

they nurse? The milk, strained through the baby's mouth to her tongue, tastes like coconut.

The tea whale was ceramic, but the difference between ceramic and glass is the difference between families of orcas in the Pacific.

The sperm whale has suffered more injustice than the others, being so named. What need could a whale have for sperm in her head? She floats and she listens, lacking nothing.

My grandmother, when I knew her: huge, with moles like barnacles jutting from her flopping neck. She was formidable even in sunlight, fingering through the dirt in her garden overlooking a canyon far from the sea. Wearing a thin linen dress—the same she wore the day her sister drowned.

The smallest whale is the dwarf sperm. I can see her lying in wait at the bottom of an ocean, partially covered by black sand, sucking at her flipper, trying to bring her deeper, deeperdeep. She moves her flipper, and the little valley at the bottom of the ocean fills in as if it never was. She's royalty, and this whale can feel rain like peas falling on the surface of the water, a mile up. She doesn't move; like me and like Harriet, she's small and waiting.

Whales are conscious breathers, living underwater but breathing air. Only one side of their brain sleeps at a time. If they fell all the way to sleep, they'd forget to breathe, and drown in shallow night water, moonlight on their backs, but no air in their lungs. This reminds me of myself—I too am afraid to sleep. Sometimes when I sleep, I see all the murdered whales of the world, and I feel

myself swallowing hard in my sleep, coconut on my breath. I worry I won't wake up, and I'll have to share eternity with murdered whales—right and killer, humpback and blue, sperm and beluga.

Climbing inside their bodies, a whaler, I'd slice through their blubber and haul out bones, slap at their skins with a stick. And at the end of the day, I'd return to a brooding cottage, mine, threatening to tumble into the sea. Harriet, looking out the windows at shadows, demands it.

And my mother would remain always at sea, hunting and hauling and killing.

Whales give live birth, and they breathe the same air I do and Harriet did. Mammal air and mammal babies.

Whales are not fish, and I hate to hear people talk of them as if they are. My mother gave me a goldfish, grey, and said, It's like a tiny whale. She meant it kindly, but how freeing it must be for those whales who grow strong enough to leave their mothers behind, in cold seas to birth new babies.

Humpbacks feed only in summer; they're too busy birthing in winter. Most whales are smart enough to travel to tropics for birthing. Every place has its dangers, and I live at the lowest point in the valley.

Trying hard to follow the rules her grandmother taught her, floating on the moonlit surface, she wakes and concentrates on sinking to the low bottom, turning off her right hemisphere and letting the left take over. Her eyes remain

open, and she longs for the day she herself was born, into the sea as rain fell. She knew that day that the sea was not as big as she had feared, napping in the womb.

Harriet only made it to three. I asked my mother if my grandmother knew anyone other than us when she died. She told me, Your grandmother looked all her life for Harriet.

But Harriet was at the bottom of the sea, and my mother does not like people who hide. When I was young, she put bricks under my bed, so I could not pretend it was the sea and I was swimming with Harriet.

The Bryde's whale's name is pronounced brooda, not brides or brutus. She is the humpback's tropical cousin, though I don't know what they share. I think Harriet would have been a Bryde's, and I am one. We are nobody's bride, nobody's cousin.

And my mother flushed my fish down the toilet.

Six years old, my grandmother watched her baby sister drown. She wasn't even a strong or steady walker yet, but Harriet decided she'd swim. The ocean was her yard, and she must have felt entitled, because with her short dress billowing in the breeze, she tottered toward the water. My grandmother, holding her knotweed, watched and sang wordlessly in the wind. She didn't tell Harriet not to go in the water, because she never imagined how far Harriet would go. And when Harriet went, my grandmother kept singing, imagining Harriet

swimming. My grandmother thought her sister was born in the water, and knew her way in it. But we lose our ways. A wave came and took Harriet, and it was not enough that my grandmother screamed for her mother.

The ceramic whale is a right whale—the whale murderers used to seek, to turn into corsets and lamps; the kind in the cottage where my grandmother grew up, without her sister.

My grandmother drank tea all her life, and she said, This whale is for you.

Harriet's dress would have come off, torn by waves and wind, within a week. Or maybe it would only take a day, and within a week her body would have taken on some sea, and been swollen and puffy, like spermaceti and like my grandmother—her sister, grown old.

I see it all the time. Perhaps Harriet really was swimming, and went off to meet a giant blue and her daughter. The mother would have recognized Harriet as a baby, and tried kindness. She would have nursed her; maybe Harriet migrated with the whales. Perhaps my grandmother should have looked in the blue whales' winter waters. Harriet is there yet, an aging matriarch sleeping with only half her self. For her body was never recovered.

The killer whale, orca, is the natural enemy of the blue whale. Killers live in packs and hunt together. Some even eat other whales. Harriet, early on, would have had a run-in with them, as they hunted her new mother and sister. The

murder of this second family would have taught her finally that she was meant to be alone. She would, like me, vaguely regret my grandmother, but.

Later, meeting a family of humpbacks, she smiled without slowing her swim.

Whales live in matrilineal families, when they can stand to have families. I have no father, because my mother didn't marry him. I have no grandfather because my grandmother didn't marry him. We all watched Harriet drown, and she didn't have a father either.

I asked my grandmother about Harriet only the once.

Whales have a highly developed communication system; they can talk and laugh and call to one another. And they can say when they're sad or when they're angry, but I'm sure they don't tell each other lies. I said this to my mother, and she said I should stop making up stories. She said Harriet was my grandmother's problem, and that I didn't know either of them.

There are things my mother doesn't know.

When the old matriarchs die, their bodies sink into the deepest sea, down where the creatures don't have eyes. Their massive bodies feed their eyeless, nearly brainless brethren for months. Without the whales, these lives in the deep could not exist. Perhaps they somehow knew, and gave up their eyes that the whales might visit.

A Bryde's whale has just reached the bottom. Both hemispheres of her mind sink with her, and when her body thuds silently to the black sand, they break like glass or ceramic thrown down a canyon. Each hemisphere is a million or a billion pieces, and they scatter at the bottom of the sea like the eyeless creatures when only the Bryde's bones are left.

Harriet's eyes, picked out by fish soon after she drowned, still reflect the sea. My grandmother too suffered misconceptions, but she died old, on the edge of a canyon far from the sea.

PRAYER

The Two live in a tail many vertebraed and haired only on the outside. Do what we do. Do what we do, they chant. You have to do it. They grow violent. The tail shakes, like a cat's, peeing. Fathers hate cats, which are often female. You have to do it! The Two begin to look alike, and The One is blonder. A cold kitchen full with cats or cheese and she cannot think of brothers, auxiliaries.

She tried explanation: Before we were morose. The father was sinister and perverse and we were leaving our town on the splintered flatbed of a truck. The daughter's arms were chapped and she couldn't talk about her legs and I was the daughter. She wanted a travel-sized bottle of lotion, but it was too early for the store to be open. She asked the father when and he said fifteen minutes. The rest of the family was somewhere she couldn't see. The father had been a renowned host of dance parties. The father had been a recluse. The father had been a teacher. It was so very early. They waited on a moony street for the father. The One who was the daughter and also me had to pee and the store was open for that and the toilet paper was painted over, pale, the paint still tacky. I used it anyway. Dabbed mawkish blue to my lips.

They did not like it. The Two said, Do what we do! Do what we do! It was customary in those days and in that tail to squeeze and to dance. Mothers were preferred to Fathers, but nostalgia grabbed hold of The One and a book said.

On the day of the father's birthday a song with words repeated many times. The daughter liked it, and chanted along. The daughter did not do what they did. The father stabbed my breast with his yellow fingers, the father never stopped talking, the father said, the father said, the father said. Fifteen minutes. You are slick. You are a slut. Do what we do, Do what we do, You have to do it. You are a —. The toilet paper is dirty blue. Where are your brothers?

They did not like it. The Two did not like it.

The Father said, Do what I say!

And I, the One, the daughter, heard a rumor over drinks. The many vertebraed tail, they said, did not belong to a cat, but the father, who hated cats, who were often female. And The Two began to gnaw like dogs. It turned out The Two were not the brothers. Or, as it were, The Two were female brothers.

And before I, The One, the daughter, could register rapture or rupture, a pelting began. The Two did not like me, The Two did not like what I did, The Two were throwing blocks of bleu cheese from the splintered flatbed of a truck into the many vertebraed tail. *Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday to You!*

YES, CHEMISTRY

A stiff, pink rug—your body. Heavier and heavier. Arms and legs. Eyelids and jaw weighted so that you cannot open—you cannot open your mouth. You: heavy, heavy, quiet.

Very, very quiet. You cannot hear your breathing. And organs and muscles heavy so you cannot tell your heart beat. You, so heavy your lungs cannot take air.

Heavy and quiet.

You are lying on a stiff, pink rug and you cannot move. You cannot move, and massaging you—me. I am massaging you and you are very, very heavy. Heavier than sinew and bone, densely packed, heavy, wet ash. You used to enjoy preparing small things, straightening.

Now, wet ash in my hands, you. Heavy, quiet.

What can we say about the past?

Atoms and molecules, red-eyed and lean, it pressed upon us. The past was an animal, and it forgave with animal instinct—often.

You are lying on the pink rug, meaty pink, and you are very, very heavy, and quiet—quieter than you've ever been—and you are filled with wet ash and the past was an animal and I am stitching you up.

Here, now.

Your father was an animal, and gaunt. They say the ashes—your father was gaunt, an animal. A critter from the crawling parts of the earth.

The ash that fills you up. You burst with the heaviness of the ash and your father and chemistry. Yes, chemistry, which you know so little about.

Heavier, quieter, older. You are growing older. Regret the animal. I, like the past, forgive. And if you remember, memory serves. The past is an egg. You, filled with ash. Nestled in the ash, an egg. Deep, deep animal egg in you. Regret the animal, nest the egg.

A trembling becomes rumbling, darkness changes—shifts to the egg in you. Big toe. Big toe, the egg, the past, the wet ash. You were forgetting that big toe, but it has not forsaken anything. Remembering, remembering, the big toe inside you; the big toe hatched from your egg. Girls together.

The pink rug matted beneath your immense weight, and the floor. The floor buckles. You're so heavy, you're going to fall through the floor. Falling through the floor—your seams are going to split. My stitches cannot hold. Atoms and molecules!

Now you have reached a place of annihilation. Your heaviness, older and older, collapses into the discretion of the big toe; and the discretion your father—animals both. Critters from the crawling parts of the earth, turned to ash in you. And you break, and you break.

*

You were so heavy. Heavy and quiet. You said so little, and sometimes you seemed to writhe, but the ash kept you. Silent, you were locked. Locked, you were relevant, vital, dying. Every contradiction. New always dawns from present, within you, here, in this case.

All your body meant was survive. But you didn't. Heavier, quieter, older, farther and farther. You reached the place of annihilation, and you reached deeper. An abyss is only an abyss if you allow yourself to be small. And the luxury of smallness. You never were. That afternoon, the fog cleared to reveal—fog. You could not wake up.

[white space]

*

We will keep this: alive. Now lightly yelling, now memorizing that rug *pink*, tender like flesh or meat, using it in a sentence. You don't have to be sorry anymore. All, all, all.

From the brink, no longer heavy, no longer quiet. The past passed, and from the egg hatched.

We just didn't know how to STOP.

What can you say about the present? Begin by saying. Places you will never miss, events you can't bring yourself to. Compounds and molecules, densely packed.

We just didn't know how to STOP.

But *you* know, it turns colder, and a heaviness like you is not for the weak of heart. Big toe rooting around, big toe once a yolk.

What's different is that now, *now*, you mean it. On days when no one is known to you, it's as if no one dies. After a break like this, explanations no longer suffice.

Only animal instinct. Begin, begin again by saying, now, without all that you cannot say.

You were wounded, yes, but first you were small, and you must admit desire for the abysmal. Yes, open your eyes, admit. Admit.